TEN SPLENDID STORIES

argosy

Victor Canning

H. E. Bates

Henry Cecil

Charlotte Armstrong

William Haggard

JANUARY 3/-

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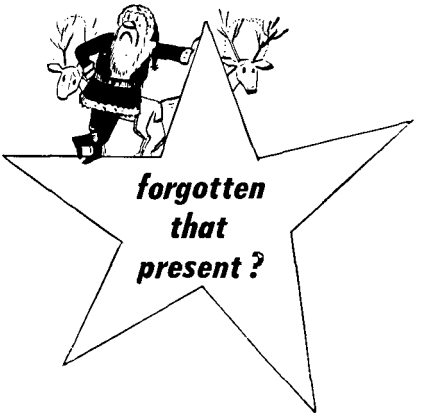

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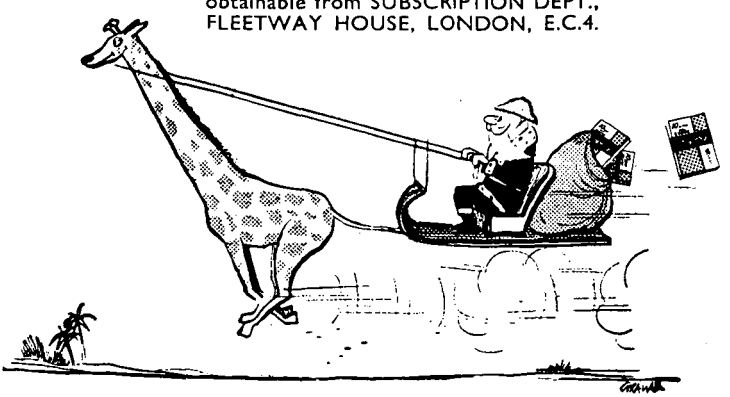

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argosy

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Acknowledgments are due for permission to reprint copyright material by the following authors : to The Cresset Press for the poem by Frances Cornford ; to The Hogarth Press for the extract from "Cider With Rosie". to Michael Joseph for the extract from "Blood and Thunder" ; to Longmans Green for the extract by Stella Gibbons , to Macmillan and the Trustees of the Hardy Estate for the poem from "The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy". to Keith Prowse Music Publishing Co. for lines from "The Percy French Song Book" . to Punch for lines by Peter Ling and Gilbert Thomas , to Rider and Co. for the extract by M. E. Clifton James ; to Eyre and Spottiswoode for the extracts from "The Railway-Lover's Companion." "The Station" is from "Seven by Five" © Evensford Productions Ltd., 1963.

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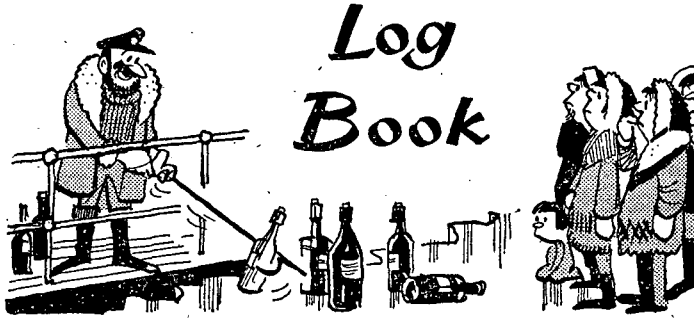

WHENEVER we hear somebody complain that fine writing is dead, we turn for contradiction and consolation to the columns of local newspapers, those vernal groves where human nature is for ever young and surprising, and where the staff are not too pressed for time to write up even small events with care and artistry.

Take for instance a headline like:

THE ARCTIC SOCIALITE FROM BEETLEBUNG ROAD

It might not achieve national-daily status but viewed in a smaller perspective it has irresistible appeal—or so we thought when we came across it in the Dartmouth (U.S.A.) historical society Bulletin.

The socialite in question, à Captain Cleveland, was a whalers' agent in northern Hudson Bay around the turn of the century. The Eskimos called him Sakoatarnak and treated him like a brother; his favourite drink was liquor; he had an Eskimo girlfriend called Fatty, and he himself agreed that his only troubles had to do with women.

Members of the fifth Thule Expedition encountered Cleveland, who welcomed them hospitably and promised to cook them an eight-course Christmas dinner, as soon as he had tested all the gift bottles presented to him by the expedition. He began testing early on Christmas morning, and by noon had decided to cut the menu to four courses, but these four, he promised, would be cooked by one of the best cooks in the world, once he had had a couple of drinks to fortify himself.

One of the courses would be caribou roast which, of course, would have to thaw out first, while it thawed he would occupy his time with a drink.

" Unfortunately," states the chronicler, " he took the drink first. The caribou remained outside in a temperature of forty below."

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It was as hard as a rock when fetched and Cleveland, somewhat surprised, decided to put it in the oven and let it thaw as it roasted, while the cook and guests had a drink.

Some time later the guests were distracted by a smell of burning. They rushed out to the kitchen and found a lot of smoke; however Cleveland carved away the burnt layer of caribou and re-roasted the interior, which was pronounced tender and delicious. After dinner—it was by now quite late—everybody turned in, Fatty, wrapped in an abundance of sealskins, to sleep beneath the kitchen stove, the guests to bed down on the dining-room floor.

At this point what had begun as a peaceful and conventional Christmas celebration was marred by the behaviour of two lemmings, kept by Cleveland as pets. Somehow their box had been overturned in the course of the evening and, searching for shelter and warmth, they made their way into the beard of one of the visitors, who leapt up with a yell, dreaming—as he afterwards said—that wolves were at him, and threw the lemmings across the room. Cleveland ran out to rescue his pets, tripped over his long nightshirt, and landed on Fatty, breaking a number of her ribs.

The rest of the story is a blank. History has nothing further to tell of Captain Cleveland, Fatty, the lemmings, the guests, or the caribou roast, but perhaps enough has been said; we ourselves have spent many an hour pondering this brief and tragic drama played out under the flicker of the northern lights.

The moral, anyhow, seems to be that, while waiting for the frozen joint to thaw—be it turkey, lamb, or a dinner-for-one—it is wiser not to sample your Christmas bottle too freely. Prudent cooks prefer to while away the time with some suitably festive reading-matter.

Argosy for choice.

JOHN SILVER

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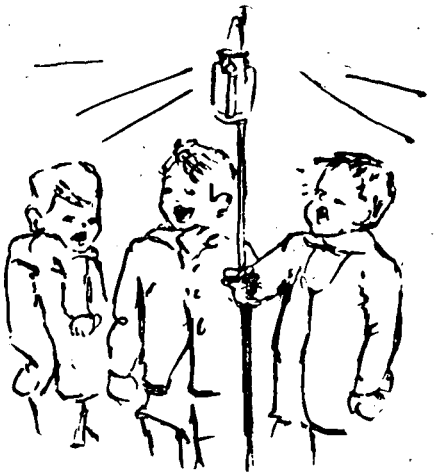

by LAURIE LEE

CAROL SINGING

Taken from Laurie Lee's enchanting book: CIDER WITH ROSIE

This night shall be the birth-time
Of Christ the Heavenly King

THE FROZEN pond . . . was a very treadmill of pleasure. Time was uncounted; sensations almost sexual; we played ourselves into exhaustion. We ran and slid till we dripped with sweat; our scarves were pearled with our breath. The reeds and horse-tails at the pond's edge smelt as pungent as old men's fingers. Hanging branches of willow, manacled in the ice, bloomed like lilac in the setting sun. Then the frost moon rose through the charcoal trees and we knew that we'd played too long.

We had promised Mother we would fetch some wood. We had to get some each day in winter. Jack and I, hands in pockets, mooched silently up the lane; it was night now, and we were frightened. The beech wood was a cavern of moonlight and shadows, and we kept very close together.

The dead sticks on the ground were easily seen, glittering with the night's new frost. As we ripped them from the earth,

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scabbed with soil and leaves, our hands began to burn with the cold. The wood was silent and freezing hard, white and smelling of wolves. Such a night as lost hunters must have stared upon when first they wandered north into the Ice Age. We thought of caves, warm skins and fires, grabbed our sticks, and tore off home.

Then there were "Where've-you-beens?" "Never-minds," "Oh-Dears," and "Come-by-the-fire-you-look-half-dead." First the long slow torment as our hands thawed out, a quiet agony of returning blood. Worse than toothache it was; I sat there sobbing, but gradually the pain wave passed. Then we had jugs of tea, hot toast and dripping; and later our sisters came.

"It was murder in Stroud. I fell down twice—in the High Street—and tore my stockings. I'm sure I showed everything. It was terrible, Ma. And a horse went through Maypole's window. And old Mr. Fowler couldn't get down the hill and had to sit on his bottom and slide. It's freezing harder than ever now. We won't none of us be able to budge tomorrow."

They sat at their tea and went on talking about it in their sing-song disaster voices. And we boys were content to know the winter had come, total winter, the new occupation . . .

The week before Christmas, when snow seemed to lie thickest, was the moment for carol singing . . . By instinct we knew just when to begin it; a day too soon and we should have been unwelcome, a day too late and we should have received lean looks from people whose bounty was already exhausted. When the true moment came, exactly balanced, we recognised it and were ready.

So as soon as the wood had been stacked in the oven to dry for the morning fire, we put on our scarves and went out through the streets, calling loudly between our hands, till the various boys who knew the signal ran out from their houses to join us.

One by one they came stumbling over the snow, swinging their lanterns around their heads, shouting and coughing horribly.

"*Coming carol-barking then?*"

We were the Church Choir, so no answer was necessary. For a year we had praised the Lord out of key, and as a reward for this service—on top of the Outing—we now had the right to visit all the big houses, to sing our carols and collect our tribute.

To work them all in meant a five-mile foot journey over wild and generally snowed-up country. So the first thing we did was to plan our route; a formality, as the route never changed. All the same, we blew on our fingers and argued; and then we chose our Leader. This was not binding, for we all fancied

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ourselves as Leaders, and he who started the night in that position usually trailed home with a bloody nose . . .

Our first call as usual was the house of the Squire, and we trouped nervously down his drive. For light we had candles in marmalade-jars suspended on loops of string, and they threw pale gleams on the towering snowdrifts that stood on each side of the drive . . . We arranged ourselves shuffling around the big front door, then knocked and announced the Choir.

A maid bore the tidings of our arrival away into the echoing distances of the house, and while we waited we cleared our throats noisily. Then she came back, and the door was left ajar for us, and we were bidden to begin. We brought no music, the carols were in our heads. "Let's give 'em 'Wild Shepherds,'" said Jack. We began in confusion, plunging into a wreckage of keys, of different words and tempo; but we gathered our strength; he who sang loudest took the rest of us with him, and the carol took shape if not sweetness.

This huge stone house, with its ivied walls, was always a mystery to us. What were those gables, those rooms and attics, those narrow windows veiled by the cedar trees. As we sang "Wild Shepherds" we craned our necks, gaping into that lamplit hall which we had never entered; staring at the muskets and untenanted chairs, the great tapestries furred by dust—until suddenly, on the stairs, we saw the old Squire himself standing and listening with his head on one side.

He didn't move until we'd finished; then slowly he tottered towards us, dropped two coins in our box with a trembling hand, scratched his name in the book we carried, gave us each a long look with his moist blind eyes, then turned away in silence.

As though released from a spell, we took a few sedate steps, then broke into a run for the gate. We didn't stop till we were out of the grounds. Impatient, at last, to discover the extent of his bounty, we squatted by the cowsheds, held our lanterns over the book, and saw that he had written "Two Shillings." This was quite a good start. No one of any worth in the district would dare to give us less than the Squire . . .

Mile after mile we went, fighting against the wind, falling into snowdrifts, and navigating by the lights of the houses. And yet we never saw our audience. We called at house after house; we sang in courtyards and porches, outside windows or in the damp gloom of hallways; we heard voices from hidden rooms; we smelt rich clothes and strange hot food; we saw maids bearing in dishes or carrying away coffee-cups; we received nuts, cakes, figs, preserved ginger, dates, cough-drops, and money; but we never once saw our patrons. We sang as it were at the castle

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walls, and apart from the Squire, who had shown himself to prove that he was still alive, we never expected it otherwise . . .

We approached our last house high up on the hill, the place of Joseph the farmer. For him we had chosen a special carol, which was about the other Joseph, so that we always felt singing it added a spicy cheek to the night . . .

Crossing, at last, the frozen mill-stream—whose wheel in summer still turned a barren mechanism—we climbed up to Joseph's farm. Sheltered by trees, warm on its bed of snow, it seemed always to be like this. As always it was late; as always this was our final call. The snow had a fine crust upon it, and the old trees sparkled like tinsel.

We grouped ourselves round the farmhouse porch. The sky cleared, and broad streams of stars ran down over the valley and away to Wales. On Slad's white slopes, seen through the black sticks of its woods, some red lamps still burnt in the windows.

Everything was quiet; everywhere there was the faint crackling silence of the winter night. We started singing, and we were all moved by the words and the sudden trueness of our voices. Pure, very clear, and breathless we sang:

As Joseph was a walking
He heard an angel sing;
"This night shall be the birth-time
Of Christ the Heavenly King.

He neither shall be borned
In Housen nor in hall,
Nor in a place of paradise
But in an ox's stall . . ."

And two thousand Christmases became real to us then; the houses, the halls, the places of paradise had all been visited; the stars were bright to guide the Kings through the snow; and across the farmyard we could hear the beasts in their stalls. We were given roast apples and hot mince-pies, in our nostrils were spices like myrrh, and in our wooden box, as we headed back for the village, there were golden gifts for all.

© Laurie Lee 1959

★ *Rich, rollicking, exuberant, Cider With Rosie streaked to the top within days of publication. World sales are now approximately three hundred and ten thousand copies and the figures are still rising. One of the best moments of Laurie Lee's life was when he saw four clerks in a row in a rush-hour train, all reading Cider With Rosie.*

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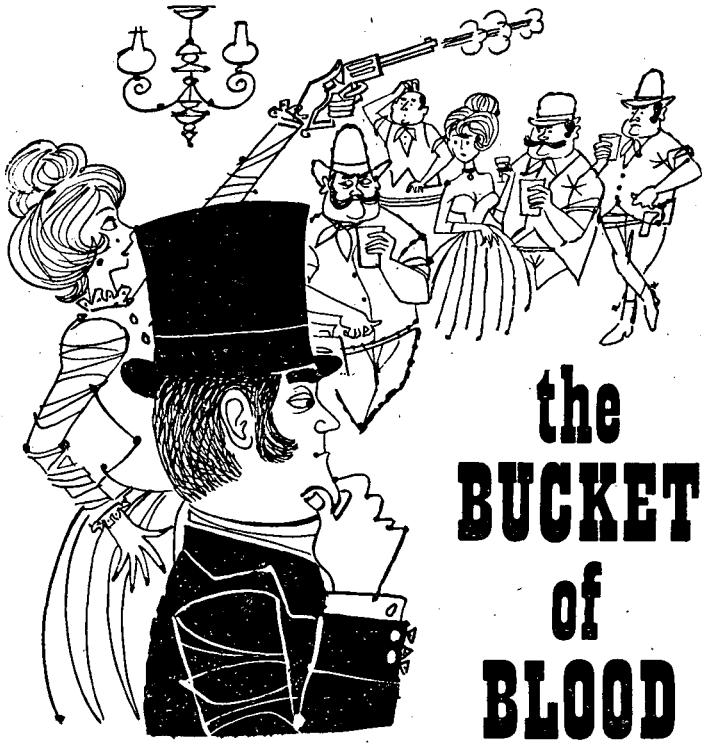

the BUCKET of BLOOD

AFTER my father and mother were divorced, I was sitting with him one day in a beer garden at Coney Island. A buxom woman on the stage was singing *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*; and my heart went out to him silently in his sorrow, for I was convinced that this song was simply an unfortunate expression of his inner thoughts about my mother. And when the singer, as an encore, launched into *Every Little Movement Has a Meaning All Its Own*, undulating her body slightly to the music, I knew that this was tied up in some way with that mysterious thing called sex, and I was so distressed for my father that I hoped he would drink up his beer and leave. But he did not leave.

When the lights went up he remarked to me that singers nowadays didn't know how to put a song over; and that he had sung a song once in a place called Jim Hanlon's Bucket of Blood which had made him famous overnight.

I was surprised to hear this, for secretly I thought his singing

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by DWIGHT TAYLOR

Charles A. Taylor, handsome hero of this period piece, combined the eloquence of the circus pitchman, the endurance of the cowboy, and the guile of the trapper with the firm conviction that the world was divided into showfolk and suckers.

At the age of five his son, the author, was shown a crowded theatre. "That is an audience," his father said. "We are show people. Never let me catch you on the wrong side of the curtain!"

left much to be desired. As a preliminary, he would clear his throat, and one became aware of a low, humming sound, tentative and uncertain, as if he were experimenting with an invisible tuning-fork before releasing the results to a waiting world. At a certain point in this procedure he would appear satisfied and, rising from his chair, take up a firm stance at the farther end of the room. No matter how peaceful his present circumstance, or how meagre the number of his listeners, one somehow got the impression that the room had become an enormous and hostile place, teeming with unruly characters who might at any moment subject him to a shower of bottles.

I remember one song in particular—a love song, I suppose one could call it—in which he accompanied the words with gestures:

I know the girl's not stylish—
Her ways are very plain;

(A sort of sweeping motion down both sides of the body, denoting a complete absence of ruffles.)

And though without fine feathers,

(Fingers of one hand opened above the head, like an Indian wearing feathers.)

She's a woman, just the same.

(A somewhat vague gesture in the region of the bosom.)

Today, she is my sweetheart—

(Both hands placed over the heart.)

Tomorrow, my wife she'll be—

(Index finger of right hand indicates third finger, left hand. Then he would step forward, and flinging his arms out in a wide gesture, as if throwing himself on the mercy of the crowd, bawl the last line at the top of his voice, directing his eyes at the upper cornices of the living-room where, in his imagination, still lurked the curtained boxes of his youth.)

So I don't care what you think or say—
SHE'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME!

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When I first heard him sing this song, I was completely unprepared for the note of defiance with which it ended. Nobody had criticised this girl, as far as I knew, and the lines which led up to this crashing climax had been delivered with disarming softness. When I asked my father about this unexpected transition, he explained that in the rowdy, noisy atmosphere of the saloons one sometimes had to startle the audience to get their attention at all.

"They were all rebels and fighters," he said. "They knew I was defying something, so it brought down the house."

As we sat together now in the beer garden, I wondered whether this was the song which had made him famous and ventured to ask him.

"No," he replied. "My prize song was about the Sullivan-Corbett fight. It was a veritable inspiration—one of those ideas which seem to fall from heaven, like the gentle dew."

He paid for his beer. We got up and went out on the board-walk.

"I had fallen in love with a girl known as Daisy from Denver," my father continued. "I met her on the Barbary Coast, where she had gone for her vacation. She was as pretty as a picture, with a million-dollar smile." He paused. "A *thousand*-dollar smile, anyway," he corrected himself. "She had a couple of diamonds set in her teeth, and when she smiled they lit up the entire room!"

"What did she have diamonds in her teeth for?" I asked.

"Well, those girls led a tough life," said my father. "They had a difficult time hanging on to anything. She was employed in a place in Pueblo called Jim Hanlon's Bucket of Blood, and when she returned there I hopped a freight and followed her."

"Didn't you have any money?" I asked.

"No. I was still only a kid, picking up a liberal education."

"That's the kind I'd like," I said.

"You stick to your books," said my father. "Then you won't get hurt."

The bay was a shimmer of coloured lights. The screams of the girls on the Sky-Ride came to us, loud and clear, from over the water; then as suddenly died away, as the cars rattled up the opposite slope.

"I arrived at The Bucket of Blood in the morning. It was what was called a boxhouse. The sawdust on the floor was two inches deep. Daisy was rehearsing the girls on the stage. They were dressed in flimsy nightgowns, and jumping over

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lighted candles. It was a number called *The Moth and the Flame.*"

My father looked down at me quickly, as if suddenly remembering my tender years. He had a habit of losing himself so completely in these recollections that he would forget his present circumstances, in which I was his solitary—and, I must say, willing—confidant.

"There was a moral to it, somewhere," he added sternly. "You couldn't do a number like that without a moral."

"I should think not!" I exclaimed.

"It teaches us not to play with fire," he said.

"In our nightgowns," I added.

"In our nightgowns, or at any *other* time!" he exclaimed with a touch of annoyance. "If you go on interrupting like this, I can't tell you about the song."

"I'm sorry," I said.

We were getting farther away now, and the odour of burning frankfurters had gradually been supplanted by the fresh smell of the sea.

"After the rehearsal, Daisy came over and sat down beside me at the table. She ordered a drink—you couldn't even say hullo to a girl in those places without buying her a drink—and she didn't seem any too glad to see me. 'You shouldn't have followed me here,' she said. 'A vacation is a vacation. This is work. Jim Hanlon will want to know your business. And he has the best bouncer this side of San Francisco, called Dynamite. If Jim doesn't like your business, Dynamite will take you outside and bounce you up and down on the pavement.'

"At that moment, Jim Hanlon came over to where we were sitting and Daisy introduced us.

"'What's your business?' asked Jim Hanlon.

"'I'm a song-writer,' I said, much to my surprise. But on the freight which I had taken from Frisco I had been turning over a plan in my mind of how I could pick up a little money, and it had been sort of blossoming there in the dark until Jim Hanlon asked me that question.

"'What kind of songs do you write?' asked Hanlon.

"'Songs for a place like this,' I said. 'Songs that will make them shut up for a few minutes, and bring down the house.'

"'For instance,' said Hanlon.

"He stood there with his thumbs in the pockets of his fancy waistcoat, looking at me with about as much expression as a mud hen. I could feel Daisy's leg starting to tremble a little against mine beneath the table.

"'I'm working on one about the Sullivan-Corbett fight,' I said. 'It ought to be ready by tonight.'

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" 'That's good timing,' said Hanlon. 'The results should be in by then, and I may give you a chance to sing it.' "

My father glanced down at me to see what my reaction would be. He was always trying to " smarten me up " with these stories, to prepare me for the rigours and uncertainties of adult life, so that I could take my place with the best of them, should I ever decide to go into the " theatre game." But I'm afraid that I was never as smart as he was—or the characters he came into contact with—for I still believed the best of everybody, and my father most of all.

" He sounds like a nice man," I said.

" No," said my father. " He was not a nice man. He was a *bad* man. People were so riled up about this fight, and were so violently divided as to its outcome, that Jim Hanlon knew that my song would probably cause a riot in which I would be lucky to get away with my life."

" What did you do? " I asked.

My father looked at his watch. He was supposed to have me back home in New York by nine o'clock. I often found myself in this cliff-hanging kind of situation, where I was dying to hear the end of a story but at the same time worried that he might lose his " right of visitation." The same thought evidently occurred to him, for he turned abruptly and started back towards the lights of the pier. I hustled to catch up with him.

" On the way into Pueblo," he continued, " the freight had made way for a wrecking crew on its way south, and the brakey told me that there had been a washout of the telegraph lines along the Arkansas River. This meant that the results from New Orleans would be delayed, and could only reach Pueblo by train.

" I went to a small, local printer and made a deal with him to set up my song in type, leaving proper spaces for the names. It went something like this." (My father made his preliminary humming sound, and then began.)

" Oh, dash-dash-dash, you're a daisy,
You've set the whole world crazy;
You're a credit to your nation and the State—
You've whipped the Great Invincible,
And won your backer's principal—
Knocked dash-dash-dash beyond the Golden Gate!"

I was stunned with the brilliance of this device. All he had to do now was find out who won the fight and he had a song ready-made, so to speak.

" I hired a pony at the livery stable and went for a ride," he

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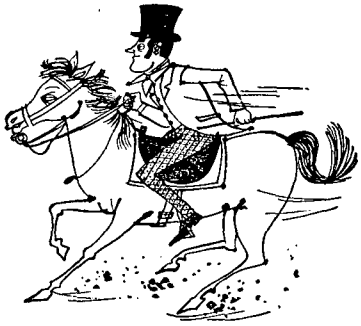

continued. "At least, everybody *thought* I had gone for a ride. But the moment I got out of town I licked up the pony and made for a steep gorge along the tracks which I knew the train would have to climb. Soon I saw her coming round the bend, puffing like an old woman climbing the stairs. I rode forward and called out to the engineer:

"'How'd the fight come out?'

"It was Corbett in the twenty-first round! My heart sank. The steel puddlers and slaughterhouse men and most of the silver miners were for Sullivan. This was the first championship fight ever to take place with gloves on, and Corbett, who was a gentleman, was suspected of having something to do with the new ruling. It didn't seem natural to this crowd. Sullivan had fought his way to the top with his bare knuckles, the way they themselves had to fight—and now he was defeated! I was afraid they would tear me to pieces.

"But I had told Jim Hanlon I would have a song written, and it was.

"With a wave to the engineer, I whipped up my pony and headed for Pueblo. Once the train had climbed the gorge and levelled off, I knew she could make pretty good time, and unless I could beat her to town my little plan would go up in smoke. I pulled up in front of the print-shop, threw the bridle over the pony's head, dashed in and told the printer the result. He slipped the sticks into the proper grooves and pulled the handle. within twenty minutes I was in The Bucket of Blood with a stack of songs under my arm. The girls had just finished the number where they jumped over the candles, and were panting like heifers after a stampede. Daisy took my hand and pulled me on to the stage.

"'I'll get them quiet,' she said and, drawing my gun from

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its holster, she fired three shots in the air. The room quietened.

"Everybody looked expectantly towards the stage. What shooting took place in The Bucket of Blood usually came from the audience, and this was a switch which was bound to attract attention.

"'Ladies and gentlemen,' sang out Daisy. 'This boy is not only a talented song-writer, but a prophet as well. He has written a song about the Sullivan-Corbett fight, and what's more, he's going to tell you *how it came out*!'

"I cleared my throat. Jim Hanlon was standing over by the bar with Dynamite, and I knew that if the audience didn't take this song in the spirit in which it was intended, my life wasn't worth a nickel. I began to sing. Even on the first line they started to rumble, deep, deep down somewhere, like the beginning of an earthquake:

"Oh, Corbett, you're a daisy,
You've set the whole world crazy;
You're a credit to your nation and the State—

"At this, some Corbett man, high up in one of the boxes, let out a 'Yippee!' which ignited other followers of Gentleman Jim, and I saw a faint hope that the audience might murder each other before they turned on me. But I persisted:

"You've whipped the Great Invincible,
Who won his backer's principal—
Knocked Sullivan beyond the Golden Gate!

"Well, sir—you couldn't hear yourself think! The steelworkers and the slaughterhouse men started throwing everything they could get their hands on. Daisy ran for the wings, and I started after her. Some people tried to climb over the footlights, but Gus and his orchestra drove them back with their chairs, prongs out, like the lion tamers do. Gus started to play *The Star-Spangled Banner*. But the mob was in no mood for patriotism. By this time groups of furious men were pouring in through the entrances on either side of the stage. Daisy handed back my gun.

"'Here, kid,' she said. 'There's one left for you.'

"At that moment a man burst through the swinging doors from the street. He had run all the way from the railroad station, and he was bursting with the importance of his news.

"'*Corbett won*!' he shouted. 'Corbett won in the twenty-first round!'

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"But nobody heard him. Dynamite picked up a mallet and started hammering on a big Chinese gong which hung behind the bar. This had some effect, for it was used only in the case of extreme emergencies, such as a fire or the request for a doctor.

"'Corbett won!' Dynamite shouted. 'Now go back to your places! You can celebrate your victory, or drown your sorrows—whichever you see fit!'

"This announcement was followed by a stunned silence. It was not so much the news of the way the fight had gone, I think, as the fact that I had already written a song about it. One of the steelworkers, who was holding me in a grip of iron, asked to see a copy of the song. I handed one to him. He ran his eyes over the words, spelling them out with his lips.

"'It's all here,' he said at last, in an awed voice. 'It's all here, in black and white!'

"I moved quietly away, carrying the copies under my arm. I jumped down into the auditorium, flourishing one aloft, like a newsboy. 'Get your copies of the big fight song—only fifty cents! Surprise your friends! The story of the big fight for only fifty cents!'"

My father paused to get his breath—and so did I! He went on:

HOME OR AWAY XXX
ARGOSY's full of kick!

This season look out for new stories by famous authors

x	JOHN WAIN	
x	RAY BRADBURY	
x	RHYS DAVIES	
x	MICHAEL GILBERT	
x	ROBERT STANDISH	
x	EDITH PARGETER	
x	HENRY CECIL	
x	CARSON McCULLERS	

You can bank on ARGOSY

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"I sold three hundred and seventy-five copies that night. Daisy got them all to sing it, Corbett and Sullivan men alike. She made a joke out of it. She brought them all together, like a great society hostess in the gilded saloons of Washington, D.C. She was a great girl!"

My father lapsed into silence. Whenever he ended these stories, I felt that he was a million miles away, back in time somewhere, with the women who moved through them, dead and gone these many years.

"You must have been a big hit!" I said, in an effort to recall him to the present. After all, we had to catch the trolley. "How long did you stay at The Bucket of Blood?"

He looked at his watch again.

"I left town the next day," he said. "I was homesick and wanted to see my old man. I really thought up the entire thing in order to get travel money."

"But how about Daisy?" I asked, as he hustled me to the station. "She must have liked you a lot to help you in that way."

"Yes, I guess she did," admitted my father. "But Jim Hanlon didn't."

"Why not?"

My father didn't answer. All he did was hustle me along by the hand. I knew he liked to sit up front like I did, where you could hear the bell ring and watch the people scurrying across the track to get out of the way. We were in luck! There was one vacant seat and he hoisted me up on to his lap.

"Why didn't Jim Hanlon like you?" I repeated. "After all, you had provided a lot of entertainment."

"I know," said my father. "But I think *he* thought I was after the diamonds in Daisy's teeth!"

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TEST RACE

Skis slightly apart, head bent forward, he was shooting down from the top

BY CURTIS W. CASEWIT

HE had slept badly. Perhaps he'd overtrained; he seemed to be skiing all night long. One moment he was asleep; the next he was awake—imaginary ski poles digging in, his full weight, nearly thirteen stone, leaning forward. His wife watched him in training. "No risks, Karl!"

"What did you say?" Karl Ernsting asked. But she was sleeping beside him. He closed his eyes and dipped into the twilight of half slumber. His skis slightly apart, his head bent forward, he was shooting down from the top. He felt light, bouncy; his legs absorbed every bump of the mountain like the springs of a car. A schuss now, with the speed needle going up to forty, fifty, sixty—boards whistling. His vision was good; he kept his eyes rooted to the obstacles below him. Two trees. He shot through them, and felt the wind against his chest. Two bamboo gates flashed past; the flags were blurs of red and yellow.

A house-high precipice loomed under him. He awoke, amid jumbled sheets, pillows, blankets. But his mind was still racing; he pre-jumped the wall-like hill, landed with perfection, flew on down. He was still elastic, still good. Now he lurched into a deep ravine, skiing as in the best of his days. Rubbing his eyes, he remembered. It had all been yesterday in training.

"You're good," Trudi had said. Because of you, he thought.

She was still asleep when he took the cold shower. The artillery of icicles gave him goose pimples. I'm going soft, he decided. He put on his grey stretch-pants and the sweater with the faded Austrian Olympic emblem. Then he tiptoed on to the hotel terrace.

It was dawn. The garlands of yesterday's ski tracks were a dark mauve. He could already see the black outline of the timers' platform. Today would be the day. Against the deep blue of the awakening snow, ropes had been strung to keep the spectators off the downhill course. Would there be a lot of people watching the race?

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He could still see them when he'd won the Durrance Cup fourteen years ago. They pressed in heavy lines against the ropes, trying to get a glimpse of him. He'd been in top form then. Quick, fearless, steady. He'd taken much of the race straight, crouching low, poles hugging his hips.

Spring had come early that year; the snow had been like melting sherbet, but fast, fast. He'd won with such a wide margin that the spectators had screamed with admiration. Standing on the cold terrace now, Ernsting could still hear the rush of their clapping, the ovations. The photographers went wild. But he was tanned then. No citified pallor. The reporters pushed close; friends had him carried on their shoulders. Would it be like that today?

"Karl!".

"Ja, Trudi." He peered into the room. His wife's eyes were open, smiling. He stepped closer. The soft, dim morning light on her face took twenty years off her age.

"I can't change your mind?"

"You can't," he said, a little too harshly, then went back to the terrace. A slice of sun had crept up behind the Rockies, sprinkling paprika over the crests. A lot of pink clouds hung in the sky. The steep hill had turned a pigeon grey, with the firs black against the snowfat mounds. He had to watch and watch, thinking, You're too seldom in the mountains nowadays.

He'd better get busy, or he'd be rusty today. He lowered himself to the brick floor. It was so cold that his hands burnt. He did a dozen push-ups and sit-ups, then flung himself into the first knee-bend. He was no longer used to the sharp thin morning air; it stabbed his lungs. He counted: up and down twenty times. Now he stood still on his right leg for two minutes, then changed, bird-like, to the left. Good balance. Muscles still hard, he decided. You'll be as good as Ruesch and Brenneman today. You'll get the Cup. You've got more experience.

He'd won more races, too. There were the months, sixteen winters ago, when he'd got both gold medals at the Olympics for Austria. Slalom and downhill. He'd raced in blizzards and fogs and under the glaring spring sun; in today's good weather, he'd win easily.

He turned into the warm room. His wife sat on the couch in her blue ski togs, white woollen headband over ears and hair. He wanted to ask her if she remembered the home-coming after his Olympic win.

Trudi said, "You'll be skiing for many more years. You don't have to race. Why do you want to do it?"

Why? He could hardly put it into words. He wasn't much

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good with words, anyway. He'd stopped racing ten years ago when he tore both Achilles' tendons. Since then he'd competed just enough to keep his veterans' racing card. His livelihood had come first. Ski boot sales.

But when he'd come to the small mountain community this time, the whole town had spoken of nothing but the Durrance Cup. Suddenly he had to compete, to win.

She stroked the white mane of his hair. "You know what they all say."

"I know."

"That you shouldn't."

"Let's have breakfast," he said.

He had an extra-light breakfast, just as in the old days. A cup of tea. Two slices of toast. The waiter was in his twenties—ruddy cheeks, nose peeling. A skier. "I hear you're racing today, Mr. Ernsting?"

Ernsting caught the slight irony in the voice. He looked into the blue eyes, which grinned now, too young to hide the thoughts: You want to compete against youngsters like Ruesch and Brenneman?

Ernsting looked at his watch. He had two more hours before the race. He would have time to call at Hoff's shop. Trudi would pick him up there.

Hoff was talking to a customer when Ernsting came in with his sample case. The store had the Swiss sense of order—fixtures carefully dusted, floors polished, tables symmetrical with stretch pants in twenty colours. Ernsting stepped past the rows of parkas, still amazed by the riot of purples, greens, and yellows that had become fashionable, and went to the shelves with boots. His own brand was sold out. A stroke of luck. If there had been a lot of boots left, he would have had to sell. He wasn't much good at that. He lacked the will to persuade, the talent to paint with words, the ability to exaggerate. Sure, he knew his boots—the leather, the shape, the weight, the why, how, and where of the stitches. Actually, his boots sold themselves because he represented the firm and because he'd been a famous skier.

"Gruess Gott, Hoff!" They shook hands. The dealer had already made up a sheet with the order. Ernsting examined it. "Too many boots for February!"

"We will have a long spring," Hoff said in German. He shifted a pair of goggles a centimetre so that he had a neat row of double eyes, with boxes precisely behind them. "Are the rumours true, Karl?"

"Ja. I am racing."

"I have known you for many years," Hoff said at length.

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" Do you remember how we raced together at Wengen? What a downhill it was, Karl! Through powder. Powder snow to our hips. We were white like bakers when we got down."

Ernsting nodded.

" What does Trudi think? "

" She now accepts it. She is my wife."

Hoff's lean face looked through the windows. The first skiers were striding by, their crossed poles and shouldered skis eager in the morning sun. Inside the shop it was quiet. Hoff said, " You should know when to hang up your boots, Karl."

" I am not ready."

Hoff studied him. " How old are you? "

" Forty."

" Yesterday is not today, Karl."

Ernsting reached for his sample case. His legs felt leaden as he walked towards the door. Trudi's fine broad head was bent towards the dirndl dresses and the Swiss pinafores and the Tyrolean hats in the window. She had brought Ernsting's rucksack with the goggles and waxes and the helmet.

Hoff went out to shake her hand. " Make sure he doesn't get hurt, Trudi! "

" I'm in good condition! " Ernsting said. He looked at his watch. One more hour. He put on the rucksack, and shoved his skis across his right shoulder. He felt limp, and when he stepped off the kerb—the unpaved road was full of holes from the tyre chains—Ernsting stumbled slightly. But he caught himself. Side by side they walked to the lift towards perhaps the four hundredth race in the twenty-five years of their marriage.

The carpark was full of tiny, new-fangled sports cars, Ernsting noticed, and under the umbrella of the platform near the lift Pepi the timer had set up his Longines and the wires.

"Gruess Gott, Pepi! "

" Gruess Gott, Karl! " The timer grinned; his long-haired, Alpine head pointed in the direction of the finish gate. There were two electronic eyes. " We didn't have those last time! "

Fourteen years ago. Ernsting's big victory. But it had been a bad race. Schuetz had cracked up, flying to death in the rocks. Salvatore had broken both legs. It was strange what had become of the men who'd challenged him for the Cup that year. Ruedi managed a microscopic ski school in Minnesota. Kindlimann had a comfortable Gasthof-Pension in Kitzbuehel. And Lindner was wandering from one hospital to the next, trying to mend his thrice-broken knee-caps.

There was a lift-line, and the Ernstings patiently waited their

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turn. Here and there, someone looked at Karl with curiosity. He had white in his hair now, but they still recognised him.

"Attaboy, Ernsting! Still pitching, eh?" It was the lift operator.

"May I leave my sample case with you?"

"Sure. Another forty-five minutes, eh?"

Ernsting nodded. He just had enough time to get to the top. He was grateful when the double chair hoisted him into the air. He already felt the excitement—the old race excitement—in his stomach. As the lift whirred upward he thought the suspense was a little worse than usual. Tense, tense. Perhaps Ruesch was faster than he anticipated, and Brenneman's legs were known to be strong.

Yesterday is not today. He looked at his watch. Forty minutes. If the lift should stop, he wouldn't make it in time, and would be disqualified. "What time do you make it, Trudi?"

She told him, then held his hand affectionately. He smiled at her but the smile came hard. From long habit, he turned to look at the valley. The sight always soothed him: the long Sunday line of skiers was now a series of nails in the white folds of the snow. The platform was a tiny matchbox, the umbrella the size of a pea. He could no longer see Pepi, who was fiddling with his wires and clocks and phones. The Gast-houses and the new motels grew smaller. The lift rose clicking, then silent through the leafless aspen, past terraces of firs, and up to the timberline.

A few spectators were already in position behind the ropes. Ernsting studied the downhill flags which Stucky had set. It was a mean course. Ernsting had trained on it for two days. He'd first skied it slowly, memorising the moguls, the bumps, the degrees of the slopes, evaluating each turn. Then he'd run the two-mile course without stopping, but cautiously, and yesterday, he'd sought and found the shortest line. He was prepared. He couldn't fail. He knew where to let go, where to jump, where to use his body as a wind-brake. The position of the gates was printed indelibly in his brain.

The top of the mountain came in sight, and Ernsting got off, coming to a neat stop in front of the warming house. He could see the starting gate; on the hill above, racers were shooting down a few yards to stop abruptly. Others bent towards their ski tips to limber up.

"There's Ruesch," Trudi said.

Just above the Ernstings, Ruesch was tying his long-thongs. He was small like a jockey, bleached hair shining in the sun. He hadn't seen Ernsting—or had he?—for he blazed towards the gate, then herringboned up again.

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"So," Trudi said, "Machs gut!" Her high Austrian forehead bent towards his lined cheeks. "A kiss for good luck!"

For a moment he looked after her solid figure—she'd be waiting for him below—then he skated to the start, where he took off his skis. He touched the edges. Sharp and complete. The base didn't have a scratch. He dried it with a handkerchief, got the waxes out. He chose two, and began to work the first one across the bottom of his boards with his palm.

"How about going as a forerunner?"

Ernsting looked up. Stucky's dark monkey face was without expression.

"I mean it, Ernsting. We could use another forerunner."

"I'm racing. And for speed."

"It's a wicked course," Stucky said. "You'll make an ass of yourself."

Ernsting didn't answer. His legs were weak with fury and fear. He forced himself to re-lace his boots, pulling so hard that his fingers hurt.

"They'll laugh at you, Ernsting."

"Let them. There is no rule which forbids me to try a last time."

"Just the rule of common sense!" Stucky's close-cropped head pushed close. "Sure, technically, we can't keep you off the slope. You've kept up your racing card. But the top age in this race is thirty. You're an old man here."

"What's my starting number?"

"You're out of shape, Ernsting."

"What's my number?"

"Three."

Ernsting slipped into his bindings, snapped them shut. "Los! Help me put it on!"

As the race chief helped with his starting number, Ernsting looked for the others. There was Ruesch—number 1—wiggling back and forth on metal skis while Brenneman—number 2—darted down a few yards with impatience, then came up again. Oh, he'd show them all a thing or two!

When the forerunner sped through the gate, things moved swiftly. It was Ruesch's turn. His small, gloved hands adjusted the helmet, the goggles. Count-down, a light shove, and he roared through and down like a rocket, blond hair flying. Two minutes later, the announcer gave his time. 2: 10: 15. Brenneman followed explosively.

He made the steep course in slightly more than two minutes. The times would be hard to beat.

"Karl Ernsting!"

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His throat was suddenly tight. He swallowed. His legs seemed like lead again. From between the gate posts he could see the first portion of the run. The spectators were all there, by the hundreds. Over the loudspeaker came a few words about his record. He caught snatches of words—Lauberhorn, Kandahar, F.I.S., Roche Cup, Durrance Cup—then: " Four—three—two—one— Go! "

He felt the plastic gate bar hit his shins. Two powerful shoves with his poles. The wax seemed right. He'd already reached the first bump. With split-second timing, he moved with it. He took the first gate smack in the middle, to increase speed, roared down the steilhang, but playing it safe by standing up. He saw the dip at the bottom long before he hit it like an efficient piston—down and up—and swept towards the forest. Weiter! On. A gate. He flashed through it, aiming high at the right speed. Fine. A sharp curve, which he handled with perfection, body forward.

Under the firs, the snow would be harder. Vorlage! Again just the right weight distribution, the right knee-action. Spine curved, he whizzed down, head forward, legs slightly apart to let the wind through. Another steeper grade; once more his chest and legs moved with it, as precisely as a scale. He danced through another gate, feeling the air pressure reduce as he entered the narrow trail through more trees. Here, it was flat and slow. He tried poling himself into more speed, but a pole slipped. He lost time, went into a crouch too soon, gaining speed too slowly. Another split-second lost. Was his thinking out of kilter?

Suddenly a snow-terrace with a two-storey abyss below. The ledge tossed him, but he made it, and stood up all the way down. He felt the speed increase again, and he welcomed it. He wasn't old at all. He belonged here. Two yellow flags—danger! He heard the scream of his skis, saw the tips rise. Fall light now! *Light!*

He somersaulted once, cartwheeled, crashed. But his muscles had given no resistance. He tumbled like an old cat, and stood again, a bit shaky. There were few spectators here, thank God. He shouldn't have looked; there was the next jump. He jumped too late, too far, too hard. The impact tossed him forward, brought him to his side, sent him sliding down the rest of the skyscraper wall with his right cheek and temple against the ice. His face burnt with hot liquid, he was bleeding.

Behind the ropes, the people stood silent—with what? Pity? Disappointment? Fear for him ? His speed had been too much for his legs, he realised. He'd gone too fast.

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He tore off his goggles, leaned forward, wobbly now, suddenly feeling lost, confused. Three gates. He foolishly braked to a standstill before them, and here someone laughed—laughed! But then he swung through and down.

Give up! his mind cried. But he could not, wouldn't on this endless course. Again he gathered speed, skis edging, braking, carving too much, now too fast, now too slow. One more gate, a few more seconds of agony. The ant-heap of spectators in view, the timers' platform, the judges under the umbrella. He straightened, knees locked. One last burst of speed—a thousand feet. He pulled in his head, squeezed the poles under his arms. He gave it all he had, shooting through the finish. There was no applause. He felt dizzy and defeated when he stopped behind the platform.

The people massed outside the fence, but Ernsting couldn't face them. His breath came in gasps. He was shaking, and his face stung with sweat and blood. Soon the next racer was through.

Ernsting could hear the congratulating bellows of the spectators, the stunning under-two-minute time. He didn't dare to ask for his own.

"Karl! Darling!"

She was wiping his face, and taking off his helmet, and stroking his wet hair. He looked at his wife. Never had he welcomed her so much. He saw the comforting smile on her lips, the familiar charm in her eyes. But the sun shone mercilessly on her face and, as though for the first time, he noticed the fine lines on her forehead. Oh, he didn't love her less for ageing! But if she had aged, so had he. One couldn't deny a fact. One had to accept it.

All around him there was youth now. Ruesch, Brenneman, and the rest—all cut from the same beaming, resilient cloth. Trudi had been right. He could still ski for years. No one could take away that joy.

No one could deprive him of the mountains. He could breathe their beauty tomorrow as he had yesterday.

The downhill course shimmered like the surface of a frozen waterfall, and the crests above were sun-flecked. He would always have those . . .

He took off his skis. Then he went to Pepi. The timer was tucking his complex equipment into leather cases.

"Na, Karl. Auf Wiedersehen!"

"Good-bye, Pepi!" And Ernsting waved his hand with graceful finality.

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HEAVENLY TWINS

It could happen to any man in Max's profession

BY VICTOR CANNING

APART from his personality and charm, his intelligence and a genius for never losing his head, there was another quality which Max Minton had above all others, and that was thoroughness—and in his job he needed it. He was a high-class cracksman and he never overlooked the smallest detail connected with any job. The police knew him well, of course, but they had only once, in his early days, been able to pin anything on him. That once had taught Max a sharp lesson.

In some ways it was surprising that he was married to a girl like Nina. She was a tall, sloe-eyed brunette of Italian extraction, always worrying when Max was out on a job, tears never far from her eyes, and as superstitious as they come—grabbing Max from walking under ladders, never letting him operate on a Friday or the thirteenth of the month, giving him little good luck tokens to carry, and so on. Max didn't mind. He was very tolerant. Women and children he regarded as special creatures to be indulged and treated tenderly. In fact, he was quite a nice sort of fellow.

He was a dinner-jacket man, and combination safes were his speciality, no tools to bulge out his well-cut clothes, and all his capital in his hands. He operated strictly between eight and ten o'clock at night, and he put a lot of preliminary work into every job.

On this June evening in point, he was going to do a job at the home of a Mr. Jacob Fawkes, a diamond merchant who often kept parcels of uncut stones overnight in his safe. Max knew the combination of the safe because three weeks before a friend of his had lifted Mr. Fawkes' wallet from his jacket while he had been taking a Turkish bath. This friend had found the combination numbers written on the back of a visiting card and then slipped the wallet back into the jacket. Careless of Mr. Fawkes, but you would be surprised how careless some men are about combination numbers.

"You will be careful, won't you, darling?" said Nina, as

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Max, immaculate in dinner jacket, was on the point of leaving their flat.

He kissed her. " Of course, love."

" You've got your rabbit's foot? "

" Of course, love." Max produced it from his pocket for inspection as Nina slipped into his buttonhole a red carnation backed by a little spray of maidenhair, the stems neatly wrapped in silver foil. Every time he went on a job the ritual was the same. She gave him a flower to wear and he had to produce the rabbit's foot.

Slim, dark, handsome, white evening scarf loose around his neck, Max strolled out of the building, flagged a taxi and drove off. Mr. and Mrs. Fawkes he knew were at the theatre, and their two children would by now be asleep in the nursery. Their nurse should have been with them, but Max knew that when the Fawkes couple went out and the children were safely asleep, she had the habit of slipping down the road for a couple of hours' chat with a boyfriend who was the hall porter at a block of flats. Very thorough Max, no job attempted until every detail had been checked and double-checked.

At the front gate Max pulled on his white gloves—and they would stay on until he left the house for the police knew his prints and his line of country—and went up to the front door and let himself in with the key which the nurse always hid under a tub of petunias in the porchway.

Inside the hall he wrapped the white scarf loosely around the lower half of his face and went into Mr. Fawkes' study. The safe was let into the wall behind a picture. Max slid the picture back and worked the combination round to the numbers which were firmly in his memory. He gave the safe handle a tug—and the safe refused to open. Max frowned. He set the combination again with extra care. But still the safe refused to open.

Now, Max never made mistakes and he knew that he had the numbers right. He guessed at once what had happened. Since Mr. Fawkes had been careless with his wallet he must have altered the combination of the safe. It was a thing which could happen to any man in Max's profession.

Then, as Max stood there debating whether he should try to break the combination by listening to the fall of the tumblers —a long job—or give up the whole business and go home, a voice behind him said politely, " Good evening."

Max turned. A small girl of about six, in pink pyjamas, was standing in the study doorway. She had fair hair, blue eyes, a teddy bear under one arm, and bare feet.

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"Good evening," said Max coolly. "Oughtn't you to have slippers on?"

"Yes," said the girl, "but I had to come quickly. Robert is locked in the bathroom. The catch has slipped again. It's too high and he can't open the door."

"That makes two of us who can't open doors," said Max. "What's your name?"

"Marcelle. Could you help with the door?"

Max nodded and smiled. He liked children. "Certainly. Show me where it is."

Marcelle turned and led him upstairs to the bathroom door. Somebody was knocking on it from the inside. Max, keeping his gloves on, slipped out his penknife and began to probe with the blade in the crack of the door for the high catch which had slipped down on the inside. In a few seconds he had the door open and Robert came out.

Robert was a small boy of about six, in pink pyjamas. He had fair hair, blue eyes, and a toy death-ray gun under one arm.

Robert said, "Thank you, sir. I'm not supposed to go in the bathroom without nurse, but she's visiting her friend. She's not supposed to, of course, but we promised not to tell."

"A promise is a promise," said Max. "Are you two twins?"

Marcelle nodded. "Yes. Daddy calls us the Heavenly Twins. Are you a friend of Daddy?"

"Yes. Now you cut along to bed. I've promised to get something out of the safe for him."

Obediently the two went along to their bedroom and Max went back to the study. With luck, he thought, he might have time to break the combination. He was just settling down to the job when a voice from the doorway said, "Won't it open?"

He turned to find Marcelle and Robert watching him.

"No, it won't," he said.

"It's a funny thing with numbers, isn't it?" asked Robert.

"Yes. Do you know what they are?"

"No," said Marcelle. "But I hope you can open it. It's our birthday tomorrow and I know our presents are in there. We could see them then."

"That wouldn't be right," said Robert. "Presents are for birthdays. And that's tomorrow."

"I want a present now," said Marcelle.

"You can't," said Robert. "Daddy says that anyway that safe can't open for the Heavenly Twins to have their presents until tomorrow. He's made it like that."

"He said that, did he?" asked Max.

"Yes. And Marcelle knows he did."

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Now, Max was no fool. It could have been that Mr. Fawkes had suspected that his wallet had been examined. If he were going to have a new combination he might this time pick a set of numbers which he would never have to write down because he could never forget them.

"Heavenly Twins he calls you, does he?" said Max pleasantly. "That means you're Gemini."

"That's right," said Robert. "Why do you keep that scarf round your face?"

"Because I've got toothache. Your birthday is tomorrow?"

Marcelle nodded. "The sixteenth of June."

"We were born in 1957," said Robert. "I had toothache once. We'll be six."

"Congratulations," said Max. He turned to the safe. It was a five figure combination. He tried 16.6.57. The safe opened. The two children clapped their hands and crowded forward, but Max motioned them back.

"Robert's right about birthdays," he said. "It isn't fair to look before the day." He opened the door wider, screening the inside from the children. "But I can tell you that there are two interesting looking parcels in there. Oh, very interesting." And there were, wrapped up in brown paper. Also there were three small washleather bags which Max slipped into his pocket and then shut the door.

"That's not fair," said Marcelle. "I want a present now."

Max smiled. She was a cute little number and he had fallen for her. "And so you shall have," he said. He took the carnation from his buttonhole, wiped the silver foil around the stems with his handkerchief—there might be prints from Nina on it and you never knew with the police—and handed it to Marcelle with a bow.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, thank you," she said.

"What about me?" said Robert.

For a moment Max was in a quandary. Then he took his penknife from his pocket. He gave the blades and the body of the knife a good polishing with his handkerchief to take off prints and handed it to Robert.

Five minutes later he was in a taxi on his way to his club where he was to hand the stones over to an accomplice who was also to give him an alibi that he had been playing cards there from eight o'clock until midnight. He phoned Nina, told her that the job was successful and that he would try not to wake her when he came back . . .

The next morning, early, a police inspector called at Max's flat. Max, in pyjamas, let him in. Nina was still sleeping.

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"Nice job you did last night at the Fawkes' house, Max," said the Inspector. "Not as careful as usual, though."

"I don't know any Fawkes," said Max, unperturbed. He knew that he had made no mistake. "Spent the evening from eight until twelve playing cards at my club."

"Indeed? This job was done about nine. Recognise that?" The Inspector tossed a penknife on to the table.

"Never seen it before."

"Naturally—and you could make that stick. That and the alibi. But there's something else, Max. This." He tossed a red carnation on the table. "I've undone the silver foil round the stem once. No prints. But you undo it—then you'll see what an ever-loving, over-anxious, superstitious wife you've got—as everyone knows."

Slowly Max unwrapped the silver foil. Inside was another thin slip of paper and, in Nina's hand, there was written on it—

Flower red, no matter what the perils be—
Bring my darling Max safe back to me.

"Still say you weren't there?" asked the Inspector. "We can soon identify the ink and the handwriting as your wife's."

But Max wasn't listening to him. He was looking up at Nina who had appeared in the doorway in a dressing-gown, her eyes welling with tears, her hands clasped nervously together.

"Nina, darling," said Max gently. "You little fool. And, good lord, it doesn't even scan!"

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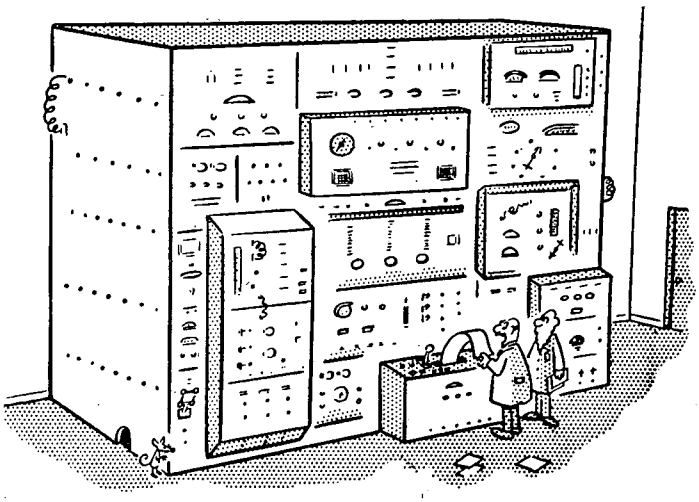

"It keeps asking for cheese"

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Merry Christmas

At home there would be snow on the ground, and holly red with berries, and young men and girls kissing beneath the white drops of the hanging mistletoe.

STUART CLOETE, *Christmas in Matabeleland*

There was plenty of holly; that is, there were plenty of berries on the holly trees, which is all that ever matters about holly, and they enjoyed themselves hooking down the branches with a walking-stick brought for that purpose. The beech leaves lay in deep copper drifts in the hollows and the dark silver trunks towered solemnly upwards to the cold fading fairy light in the sky . . . Gradually their arms grew full of branches and sprays; trails of ivy with dark jade green leaves, the bright black berries of the honeysuckle, dim red rose-hips and the fans of the fir-tree.

STELLA GIBBONS, *The Bachelor*

Six Green Singers

The frost of the moon stood over my floor
And six green singers stood at my door.

" What do ye here that music make? "
" Let us come in for Christ's sweet Sake."

" Where do ye make for? " I asked of them.
" Our Shrine is a Stable in Bethlehem."

" What will ye do as ye go along? "
" Sing to the world an ever-green song.

" Six green branches we leave with you;
See they be scattered your house-place through.

" The staunch blithe Holly your board shall grace,
Mistletoe bless your chimney-place,

" Laurel to crown your lighted hall,
Over your bed let the Yew-bough fall,

" Close by the cradle the Christmas Fir,
For elfin dreams in its branches stir,

" Last and loveliest, high and low,
From ceil to floor let the Ivy go."

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From each glad guest I received my gift
And then the latch of the door did lift—
"Green singers, God prosper the song ye make
As ye sing to the world for Christ's sweet Sake."

ELEANOR FARJEON

"Our clerk, who was once a gardener, has this Christmas so overdeckt the church with greens that he has quite spoilt my prospect . . . The pulpit itself has such clusters of Ivy, Holly, and Rosemary about it that a light fellow in our pew took occasion to say that the congregation heard the Word out of a bush, like Moses."

The Spectator, 1712

On Christmas Day

A ll attend to what I say:
C hrist, the Lord, was born to-day,
H is little body lapped in hay
R ound him breathing oxen lay
I n the warm stall.
S hepherds first the tidings told,
T hen the Kings in fur and gold
M ade their way across the wold,
A ngels carolled in the cold,
S now covered all.
S o sang they
O n Christmas Day,
N ow as then
G ood-will to men.

FRANCES CORNFORD,
A Christmas Anagram

Dean Swift to Stella

Dec. 25 1710

I wish you a merry Christmas, and many, many a one . . . I was at church to-day by eight, and received the sacrament, and came home by ten; then went to Court at two; it was a Collar-day, that is, when the Knights of the Garter wear their Collars . . .

Dec. 26 1710

By the lord Harry I shall be undone here with Christmas boxes. The rogues at the Coffee-house have raised their tax, everyone giving a crown, and I gave mine for shame, besides a great many half crowns to great men's porters.

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Christmas Feast

First, a shield of brawn with mustard; secondly, a boyl'd capon; thirdly, a boyl'd piece of beef; fourthly, a chine of beef, roasted; fifthly, a neat's tongue, roasted; sixthly, a pig roasted; seventhly, chewets baked; eighthly, a goose roasted; ninethly, a swan roasted; tenthly, a turkey roasted; the eleventh, a haunch of venison; the twelfth, a pasty of venison; the thirteenth, a kid, with a pudding in the belly; the fourteenth, an olive pye; the fifteenth, a couple of capons; the sixteenth, a custard, or dowsets.

Now to these full dishes may be added . . . as many dishes more, which make the full service no less than two and thirty dishes . . . which will be both contentment to the guest, and much pleasure and delight to the beholder.

GERVASE MARKHAM

This Christmas Night . . .

Oh, bring not gold this Christmas night!
'Twas gold that Gaspar bore,
And bring not frankincense such as
Was borne by Melchior:

But come to Him this Christmas night
As once the shepherds came,
With empty hands, yet, in their eyes,
Burned wonder's subtle flame,
And in their minds was quiet faith,
And in their hearts the tall
White flower of love. Such gifts they bore
Who bore no gifts at all.

Now, in your eyes, let wonder be;
Let love be in your heart;
Faith in your mind, unworldly things
Not sold in any mart—
And yet, a Child had need of these.
Who bear such gifts, draw nigh!
For these give peace not frankincense
Nor myrrh nor gold can buy.

VIOLET ALLEYN STOREY

Greeting!

Dec. 25 1820

P.S. I conclude, poetically, with the bell-man,
"A merry Christmas to you!"

LORD BYRON, *in a Letter to Tom Moore*

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THE STATION

He stood helpless, intoxicated by the smell of corn and plums and the night warmth

BY H. E. BATES

FOR THIRTY seconds after the lorry had halted between the shack and the petrol pumps the summer night was absolutely silent. There was no wind; the leaves and the grass stalks were held in motionless suspense in the sultry air. And after the headlights had gone out the summer darkness was complete too. The pumps were dead white globes, like idols of porcelain; there was no light at all in the station. Then, as the driver and his mate alighted, slamming the cabin doors and grinding their feet on the gravel, the light in the station came suddenly on: a fierce electric flicker from the naked globe in the shack, the light golden in one wedge-shaped shaft across the gravel pull-in. And seeing it, the men stopped. They stood for a moment with the identical suspense of the grass and the trees.

The driver spoke first. He was a big fellow, quite young, with breezy blue eyes and stiff untrained hair and a comic mouth. His lips were elastic: thin bands of pink india-rubber that were for ever twisting themselves into grimaces of irony and burlesque, his eyes having that expression of comic and pained astonishment seen on the painted faces of Aunt Sallies in shooting galleries.

His lips twisted to the shape of a buttonhole, so that he whispered out of the one corner. " See her? She heard us come. What'd I tell you? "

The mate nodded. He too was young, but beside the driver he was boyish, his cheeks pink and smooth and shiny as white cherries, his hair yellow and light and constantly ruffled up like the fur of a fox-cub. And unlike the driver's, his lips and eyes were quite still, so that he had a look of intense immobility.

He could see the woman in the shack. Short white casement curtains of transparent lace on brass rods cut across the window, but above and through them he could see the woman clearly. She was big-shouldered and dark, with short black hair, and her face was corn-coloured under the light. She seemed about thirty, and that astonished him.

" I thought you said she was young," he said.

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"So she is." The driver's eyes flashed white. "Wait'll you git close. How old d'ye think she is?"

"Thirty. More."

"Thirty? She's been here four year. And was a kid when she was married, not nineteen. How's that for you?"

"She looks thirty."

"So would you if you'd kept this bloody shack open every night for four year. Come on, let's git in."

They began to walk across the gravel, but the driver stopped.

"And don't forgit what I said. She's bin somebody. She's had education. Mind your ups and downs."

And when they opened the door of the shack and shuffled in, the driver first, the mate closing the door carefully behind him, the woman stood behind the rough-carpentered counter with her arms folded softly across her chest, in an attitude of unsurprised expectancy. The counter was covered with blue-squared oilcloth, tacked down. By the blue alarm clock on the lowest of the shelves behind it, the time was four minutes past midnight. At the other end of the shelf, a flat shallow kettle was boiling on an oil-stove. The room was like an oven. The woman's eyes seemed curiously drowsy, as though clouded over with the steam and the warm oil-fumes. And for half a minute nothing happened. She did not move. The men stood awkward. Then the driver spoke. His india-rubber mouth puckered comically to one side, and his eye flicked in a wink that was merely friendly and habitual.

"Well, here we are again."

She nodded; the drowsiness of her eyes cleared a little. All the same there was something reserved about her, almost sulky.

"What would you like?" she said.

"Give me two on a raft and coffee," the driver said.

"Two on a raft and coffee," the woman said. She spoke beautifully, without effort, and rather softly. "What's your friend going to have?"

The mate hesitated. His eyes were fixed on the woman, half-consciously, in admiration. And the driver had to nudge him, smiling his india-rubber smile of comic irony, before he became aware of all that was going on.

"Peck up," the driver said.

"That'll do me," the mate said.

"Two on a raft twice and coffee," the woman said. "Is that it?"

Though the mate did not know it for a moment, she was addressing him. He stood in slight bewilderment, as though he were listening to a language he did not understand. Then as he

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became aware of her looking at him and waiting for an answer, the bewilderment became embarrassment and his fair cherry-smooth cheeks flushed very red, the skin under the short golden hairs and his neck flaming. He stood dumb. He did not know what to do with himself.

"I'm afraid I don't know your friend's name or his tastes yet," the woman said. "Shall I make it two poached twice and coffee?"

"Just like me. Forgot to introduce you," the driver said. His mouth was a wrinkle of india-rubber mocking. "Albie, this is Mrs. Harvey. This is Albert Armstrong. Now mate on Number 4, otherwise Albie."

The woman smiled and in complete subjection and fascination the boy smiled too.

"Are you sure that's all right?" she said. "Poached and coffee? It sounds hot to me."

"Does me all right," the driver said.

"I could make you a fresh salad," she said. And again she was speaking to the mate, with a kind of soft and indirect invitation. "There would be eggs in that."

"I'll have that," the mate said.

"What?" the driver said. His eyes were wide open, his mouth wide also in half serious disgust, as though the mate had committed a sort of sacrilege. "You don' know what's good."

"So you'll have the salad?" the woman said.

"Yes, please."

"I can give you the proper oil on it, and vinegar. You can have fruit afterwards if you'd like it."

"Fruit?" the driver said. "What fruit?"

She took the kettle from the oil-stove and poured a little hot water into the coffee-pot and then a little into each of the egg-poachers. "Plums," she said.

"Now you're talking," the driver said. "Plums. Some sense. Now you *are* talking."

"Go and get yourself a few if you like them so much."

"Show me. Show me a plum tree within half a mile and I'm off."

"Go straight down the garden and it's the tree on the left. Pick as many as you like."

The driver opened the door, grinning. "Coming, Albie?"

"You're not afraid of the dark, are you?" the woman said.

This time she was speaking to the driver. And suddenly as he stood there at the door, grimacing with comic irony at her, his whole head and face and neck and shoulders became bathed in crimson light, as though he had become the victim of a colossal

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blush. Startled, he lifted up his face and looked up at the shack from the outside. The bright electric sign with the naked letters saying simply *The Station* was like a fire of scarlet and white. At intervals it winked and darkened, on and out, scarlet to darkness, *The Station* to nothing. The driver stood with uplifted face, all scarlet, in surprised admiration.

"Blimey, that's a winner. When'd you get that?"

"It's new this week."

"It's a treat. It makes no end of a difference. How's it you didn't have it on when we came in?"

"I keep forgetting it. I'm so used to sitting here in the dark I can't get used to it. It's a bit uncanny."

The driver went down the shack steps, into the night. The woman, busy with the eggs, and the boy, leaning against the counter, could see him standing back, still faintly crimson, in admiration of the eternal winking light. And for a minute, as he stood there, the station was completely silent, the August darkness like velvet, the sultry night air oppressing all sound except the soft melancholy murmur of the simmering kettle. Then the woman called, "You'd better get your plums. The eggs won't be two minutes."

The driver answered something, only barely audible, and after the sound of his feet crunching the gravel the silence closed in again.

It was like a stoke-room in the shack. The smells of coffee and eggs and oil were fused into a single breath of sickening heat. Like the driver, the boy stood in his shirtsleeves. He stood still, very selfconscious, watching the woman breaking the eggs and stirring the coffee and finally mixing in a glass bowl the salad for himself. He did not know what to do or say. Her thin white dress was like the silky husk of a seed-pod, just bursting open. Her ripe breasts swelled under it like two sun-swollen seeds. And he could not take his eyes away from them. He was electrified. His blood quivered with the current of excitement. And all the time, even though she was busy with the eggs on the stove, and the mixing of the salad, very often not looking at him, she was aware of it. Looking up sometimes from the stove or the salad she would look past him, with an air of arrested dreaminess, her dark eyes lovely and sulky. The deliberation of it maddened him. He remembered things the driver had said as they came along the road. The words flashed in his mind as though lit up by the electricity of his veins. "She's a peach, Albie. But I'll tell you what. One bloody wink out o' place and you're skedaddled. She won't have it. She's nice to the chaps because

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it's business, that's all. See what I mean, Albie? She'll look at you fit to melt your bleedin' heart out, but it don't mean damn all. She wants to make that station a success, that's all. That's why she runs the night shack. Her husband runs the day show and she's second house, kind of. It's her own idea. See?"

And suddenly his thoughts broke off. The lights in his brain, as it were, went out. His mind was blank. She was looking at him. He stood transfixed, his veins no longer electric but relapsed, his blood weak.

"Like it on the lorry?" she said.

"Yes." He hardly spoke.

She had finished making the salad and she pushed the bowl across the counter towards him before speaking again.

"You're not very old for the job, are you?"

"I'm eighteen."

"Get on with old Spike?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it lonely at first? They all say it's lonely when they first begin."

"I don't mind it."

"What's your girl say to it?"

It was as though the electric sign had been suddenly turned on him as it had been turned on the driver. He stood helpless, his face scarlet.

"I ain't got a girl."

"What? Not a nice boy like you?" She was smiling, half in mockery. "I know you must have."

"No."

"Does she love you much?" She looked at him in mock seriousness, her eyes lowered.

"I ain't got one."

"Honest?" She pushed the bottles of oil and vinegar across the counter towards him. "I'll ask Spike when he comes in."

"No, don't say anything to Spike," he begged. "Don't say nothing. He's always kidding me about her, anyway."

"You said you hadn't got a girl."

"Well—"

She took two plates from the rack behind the counter and then knives and forks from the drawer underneath the counter and then laid them out.

"Does she hate it when you're on nights?" she said.

"Yes."

"What's she like—dark or fair?"

"Dark."

"Like me?"

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He could not answer. He only gazed straight at her in mute embarrassment and nodded. Every word she uttered fired him with passionate unrest. The current in his blood was renewed again. He felt himself tightened up. And she could see it all.

"You'd better call Spike," she said. "The eggs are ready."

He moved towards the door. Then he turned and stopped. "Don't say nothing," he said.

"All right."

He stood at the door, his face scarlet under the winking sign, and called out for Spike, singing the word, "Spi-ike!" And he could hear the sound echoing over the empty land in the darkness. There was a smell of corn in the air, stronger and sweeter even than the smell of the heat and cooking in the shack. It came in sweet waves from across the invisible fields in the warm night air.

"I know how you feel," she said.

He turned sharply. "How?"

"Come and eat this salad and cool down a bit."

He came from the door to the counter in obedience, pulling out a stool and sitting on it.

"Oil and vinegar?" she said. "The coffee will be ready by the time Spike comes."

"How do I feel?" he insisted.

"You know."

"Yes, but how do you know?"

"I've felt like it myself."

She stood with her arms folded and resting on the counter edge, and leaning slightly forward, so that he could see her breasts beneath the open dress. She looked at him with a kind of pity, with tenderness, but half amused. He saw the breasts rise and fall with the same slow and almost sulky passion as she looked at him. He stared from her breasts to her face, and she stared back, her eyes never moving. And they stood like that, not moving or speaking, but only as it were burning each other up, until suddenly Spike came in.

The woman stood up at once. Spike's cupped hands were full of plums. "They're green," the woman said.

"By God, if I didn't think they was tart."

"Didn't you find the right tree? On the left?"

"I couldn't see a blamed thing."

"Eat your eggs. I'll get a torch and we'll go down and get some ripe ones before you go."

"Eggs look good an' all," Spike said.

The men ate in silence, the woman busy with bread and coffee. The boy put vinegar on his salad, but not oil, and once, noticing

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it, she unstoppered the oil bottle and pushed it across to him. It was her only sign towards him. The old manner of pity and intimacy had vanished. She was the proprietress; they were the drivers come in to eat. She stood almost aloof, busy with odd things at the far end of the counter. And the boy sat in fresh bewilderment, at a loss, and in wonder about her.

They each drank two cups of coffee and when the cups were finally empty she said, " If you're ready we can go down and get the plums. But I don't want to hurry you."

" I'm fit," Spike said. " And my God the eggs were a treat. You missed a treat Albie, not having eggs."

" The salad was all right."

" I'll get the torch," the woman said. " You go out that door and I'll meet you round the back."

She went out of the shack by a door behind the counter, and the boy followed Spike through the front door, under the electric sign. Outside, behind the shack, the sweet smell of ripened corn and night air seemed stronger than ever. At the side of the shack and a little behind it, the bungalow stood out darker than the darkness. And after a minute the torch appeared from the bungalow and began to travel towards the men. The boy could see it shining white along the cinder path and on the woman's feet as she came along.

" You walk down the path," she said. " I'll show the light."

Spike began to walk down the path, the boy following him, and then the woman. The shadows strode like giants over the garden and were lost beyond the yellow snake fence in the dark land. The garden was short, and in a moment they all three stood under the plum tree, the woman shining the torch up into the branches, the tree turned to an immense net of green and silver.

" I'll shine, Spike," she said. " You pick them. If they're soft and they lift off they're ripe."

" This is better," Spike said. His mouth was already full of plums. " I struck one match to every blamed plum when I came down."

The woman stood a little away from the tree, shining the torch steadily, making a great ring of white light across which little moths began to flutter like casual leaves. The boy stood still, not attempting to move, as though he were uninvited.

" What about you? " she said.

And again he could feel the old softness of sympathy and pity and insinuation in her voice, and again his blood leapt up.

" I'm about full up," he said.

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"Take some for the journey."

He stood still, electrified.

"Take some to eat on the way. Look here, come round the other side. They're riper."

She moved round the tree, shining the torch always away from her. He followed her in silence, and then in silence they stood against the plum branches, in the darkness behind the light. He saw her stretch up her arm into the silver leaves, and then lower it again.

"Where's your hand?" she was whispering. "Here. It's a beauty." The soft ripe plum was between their hands. Suddenly she pressed it hard against his hands, and the ripe skin broke and the juice trickled over his fingers. "Eat it, put it in your mouth," she said. He put the plum into his mouth obediently, and the sweet juice trickled down over his lips and chin as it had already trickled over his hands.

"Was that nice?" she said softly.

"Lovely."

"Sweet as your girl?"

It seemed suddenly as if his blood turned to water. She was touching him. She took his hand and laid it softly against her hip. It was firm and strong and soft. It had about it a kind of comforting maturity. He could feel all the sulky strength and passion of her whole body in it. Then all at once she covered his hand with her own, stroking it up and down with her fingers, until he stood helpless, intoxicated by the smell of corn and plums and the night warmth and her very light, constant stroking of his hand.

"Shine the light," Spike called. "I can't see for looking."

"I'm shining," she said. "Albie wants to see too."

"Getting many, Albie?"

"He's filling his pockets."

She began to gather the plums off the tree with her free hand as she spoke, keeping her other hand still on his, pressing it against her by an almost mechanical process of caressing. He reached up and tore off the plums too, not troubling if they were ripe, filling one pocket while she filled the other, the secrecy and passion of her movements half demoralising him, and going on without interruption until Spike called, "Albie! Plums or no plums, we shall have to get on th' old bus again."

"All right."

The boy could hardly speak. And suddenly as the woman took her hand away at last he felt as if the life in him had been cut off, the tension withdrawn, leaving his veins like dead wires.

He stumbled up the path behind Spike and the woman and

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the light. Spike was gabbling, "The sweetest plums I ever tasted. When we come back I'll take a couple of pounds and the missus'll pie 'em."

"When will you be back?"

"The night after tomorrow."

"There'll be plenty," she said.

She said nothing to the boy, and he was dumb.

"Let's pay you," Spike said.

"A shilling for you, and ninepence for the salad," she said.

"Salad's cheaper," Spike said. "I'll remember that. What about the plums?"

"The plums are thrown in."

They paid her. Then she stood on the shack steps while they crunched across the pull-in and climbed up into the cab, the bright red sign flashing above her.

"That sign's a treat," Spike called. "You could see it miles off."

"I'm glad you like it," she called. "Good night."

"Good night!"

Spike started up, and almost before the boy could realise it the lorry was swinging out into the road, and the station was beginning to recede. He sat for some moments without moving. Then the lorry began to make speed and the smell of corn and plums and the summer land began to be driven out by the smells of the cab, the petrol and oil and the heat of the engine running. But suddenly he turned and looked back.

"The light's out," he said.

Spike put his head out of the cab and glanced back. The sign was still flashing but the shack itself was in darkness.

"She's sitting in the dark," he said. "She always does. She says it saves her eyes and the light and she likes it better."

"Why?"

"Better ask her." Spike put a plum in his mouth. "I don't know."

"What's her husband doing, letting her run the place at night, and sit there in the dark?"

"It's her own idea. It's a paying game an' all, you bet your life it is."

The boy took a plum from his pocket and bit it slowly, licking the sweet juice from his lips as it ran down. He was still trembling.

And glancing back again he could see nothing of the station but the red sign flashing everlastingly out and on, scarlet to darkness, *The Station* to nothing at all.

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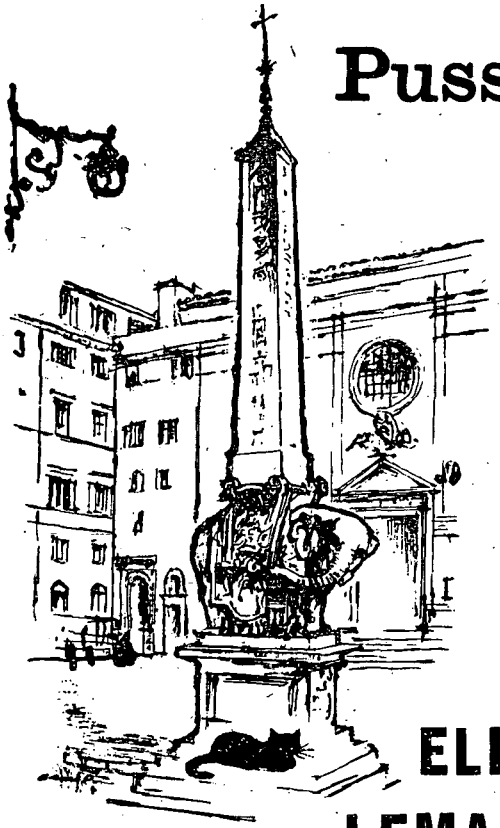

Pussycats and Owls

BY ELIZABETH LEMARCHAND

ROME is apt to over-stimulate the imagination of the historically minded. The great west door of the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva stood open, the dim and branching Gothic interior suggesting one of the ever-recurring forests of myth and folklore. I was both hot and surfeited with Baroque and, crossing the threshold, let the past envelop me.

The personalities associated with this church are potent. The redoubtable Catherine of Siena lies illuminated under the high altar, her rather grim little mouth unrelaxed. Behind her in the choir are the monuments of those regrettable Medici Popes, "God-gave-us-the-Papacy-so-let-us-enjoy-it" Leo X, and the weak and shifty Clement VII, to whom Henry Tudor's divorce

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petition was a provincial irritation. The simple gravestone of Fra Angelico seems like a small sunlit glade where he lies serenely, his artist's hands subtly and exquisitely stressed amid the folds of his monastic habit. I wandered on, and presently sat down and began to think about Galileo.

The Dominican monastery next door was the seat of the Inquisition in Rome, and there the old man was "tried," and from there brought into the church to read his recantation. These very walls heard it, and perhaps, too, the muttered "e si pur muove" at the end. There was something sinister in the thought of that building next door. The sunlight and bustle of the piazza outside suddenly seemed attractive. I made my way down the great nave and out on to the steps, feeling rather devitalised by my imaginative excursions.

I stood for a moment looking at the obelisk, already an ancient monument when Rome was young, perched so lightheartedly by Bernini on the back of a little marble elephant. Then I began to cross the piazza in the direction of the Pantheon. As I came up behind it, I noticed a fluted marble pillar and some fragments of frieze lying beside it. They were in an area about twenty feet below street level, and I went across to look at them more closely. As I did so I got a fleeting impression of scurried movement at the base of the pillar, and of small forms and waving tails vanishing into an archway.

Those poor wretched strays, I thought. Why on earth don't they either feed them or put them down?

The frieze was interesting, and I glanced up to see if it could have fallen from immediately above. It was at this moment that I saw the cat. It was sitting on the top of a high, partly grass-grown fragment of wall, and the sight of it gave me an odd little frisson, for it certainly had not been there a second earlier, and yet it gave the impression of having been in situ for a very long time. Sitting upright on its haunches, it was absolutely immobile, and stared over my head towards the Piazza Minerva with the pupils of its great amber eyes narrowed to slits. It had tabby markings on a very pale sandy ground. I stared at it, fascinated, trying to discover what was unfamiliar and even slightly disquieting about the creature.

". . . stiffen and look."

I suddenly became aware that someone was standing at my elbow, speaking to me, and with an effort brought my attention to focus on a woman of quite strikingly bizarre appearance. It was not that her skin was dark or that the fullness of her lips suggested negro blood: such things are common enough in a cosmopolitan city. Her black hair hung in two tresses in front of her

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shoulder, and was bound in a kind of embroidered fillet, and her over-long, rather shapeless white dress reached almost to her sandalled feet. I noticed that she wore big golden hoop ear-rings, and sundry brooches and bracelets, and had large and beautiful dark eyes, heavily mascara-ed.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, having caught only her last few words.

She looked at me with an intensity reminiscent of the cat's stare. "I am very often here," she replied, edging closer. "I was watching you and I saw you stiffen and look. So I knew I must speak."

I drew back a little, vexed at being accosted by an obvious eccentric, and also finding her close physical proximity distasteful. The possibility that she was going to ask for money flashed through my mind, but she did not give the impression of poverty in spite of her extraordinary appearance.

"No, I am not a beggar, nor am I crazy," she went on, reading my thoughts uncomfortably well. "It is that I have been here many, many years, and I know."

She spoke English with an unplaceable foreign accent, correctly although not idiomatically. I realised, with the slight annoyance that it always arouses, that she had divined my own nationality without difficulty.

"Were you here all through the war?" I asked, in an attempt to get the conversation on to a more rational level before bringing it to an end.

"Certainly. But what is one war here in Rome? Nearly three thousand years of the conflicts of the parties, the personalities, the ideologies. And they are not yet finished, some of the ancient conflicts, madam, I do assure you."

Definitely unhinged, I thought, noting the feverish brightness of the beautiful eyes and the hands clasped in the region of the heart. Aloud, I said briskly, "Yes, Rome is most interesting historically. And now I must be going on, I'm afraid, as I have an appointment—"

Something shot over my head, seeming to clear it by only a fraction of an inch. As I ducked involuntarily a spitting, screeching sound came from the direction of the wall. A sweep of wings almost brushed my face, and was gone. Startled, I looked for the cat, which the encounter with the woman had driven from my mind. The wall was empty. Once again I had a fleeting impression of scurrying movements near the base of the pillar. Then a brown feather, touched with white, filtered slowly down through the air and came very, very gently to rest on a step of cracked white marble.

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Turning to my companion I was appalled by the look of triumph—in fact, of exultation—on her face. Before I could speak she had gripped my arm.

"It is the first time ever—ever—that another sees them, madam. At last I can speak of it."

"Speak of *what*?"

She glanced quickly round and craned up as if to whisper in my ear. Unwillingly I bent down my head.

"The pussycats and the owls, madam," she mouthed.

"I simply don't know what you are talking about," I said angrily, unwillingly conscious of the sharp prickling of my spine.

She was still holding my arm, and swung me round so that we were facing the Piazza Minerva, indicating it with stabs of her forefinger.

"Piazza Minerr-rrva, madam. The owls of Minerva. Her birds—birds of prey—terrible birds. Enemies of the holy cats of Bast by the sacred obelisks, of which the Emperors sacrilegiously robbed Egypt. Holy Church forgot about the animals when she cast out the goddesses for the Virgin and the Saints!"

She flung back her head with a little laugh, horrifying in its utterly alien quality, abruptly released my arm, and was gone.

I stood speechless, steadying myself by holding on to the railing, and watched her thread her way through the traffic and disappear round a corner.

She must have hypnotised me, I thought. Really, an extraordinarily unnerving encounter. Very odd indeed. I suppose the bird must have been one of those swifts flying low.

I glanced up at the skeins of arrowy birds entwining the roofs and uttering thin, shrill cries. Below, a black and battered tom picked its way to the cracked marble step, sat down, and began its toilet.

"Well, I'm on your side in the war, old man," I said aloud. "I hate spooky things that whizz over my head."

The cat stopped dead in its cleaning operations and raised its head. It appeared to be listening intently, but gave no sign of associating the remark with myself.

The lethal character of Roman road traffic has the advantage of making one concentrate exclusively on the immediate present. By the time I had reached my pensione I was firmly re-established in the 1960s, and letters from England and a rapid change for a dinner engagement quickly dispelled any hangover from the incidents outside the Pantheon. I dined with friends in the gay and vital Piazza Navona, and thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

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"Have you done any painting yet?" I was asked.

"I haven't picked up a brush—just mooned and gaped, as I always do when I first come out. But I'm starting tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Piazza Minerva. Pure frivolity to begin with. I've fallen for the little elephant."

"The obelisk supporter?"

"Yes. I love his expression. Unlike Queen Victoria, he is amused. And there's a nice bit of Pantheon behind him."

It was after midnight when I returned to the pensione, which occupied the fifth floor of a Renaissance palace. As I unlocked my bedroom door, something soft rubbed against my legs. I stooped to stroke a cat, but could see nothing: the animal seemed to have vanished into the shadows of the dimly-lighted corridor. Pleasantly tired, I was soon in bed, and asleep . . .

Some time later I found myself being unwillingly dragged up into consciousness by an unidentified sound which was arousing my instinct of self-preservation. Finally the waking world became more clearly focused, and I realised that it was a kind of scratching, gnawing sound, and was evoking the image of mice in my mind. I am not afraid of mice, but loathe the idea of their running over my face while I am asleep.

Fully awake now, I listened intently. The room was dark except for the light from a street lamp, shafting through the louvres of the closed shutters. For a time there was complete silence. Then the sound began again. It seemed much louder now, and also different, no longer scratching and gnawing, but the rapid, vigorous splintering of wood. My heart began to race, and I shot up in bed in the grip of real fear, the fear of rats. Switching on my bedside lamp I tried to locate the noise, with some idea of flinging my slippers in its direction, and of possibly scaring the creature away. There was another pause. Then two things seemed to happen at once: I realised that the splintering came from the windowsill, outside the shutters, and that at the same time someone—or something—was trying to get in at the door.

I found myself standing at the foot of the bed, gripping the bedrail with one hand while I pressed the other tightly over my mouth. Thoughts were streaming incoherently through my mind. The events of the afternoon began to resurrect themselves with lightning speed. Only a bird could be on an outside window at fifth-floor level . . . only one kind of bird about at night had a beak that could splinter wood like that . . . her birds . . . terrible birds . . . Through the soles of my bare feet I could feel the diamond pattern of the chilly terracotta tiles of the floor. Trapped between two terrors I plumbed the depths of fear. Then, from

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the door, came a sharp scratch and an unmistakable and peremptory mew.

The familiar everyday sound broke the tension. Life and movement flowed back into my limbs. I snatched my dressing-gown and rushed to the window. Something oval-shaped was discernible outside the shutters.

"Get away," I said, "get away!" I beat wildly on the inside of the shutters with the dressing-gown. "Get off, or I'll let that cat in!"

Suddenly there was nothing to be seen. I reeled back to my bed and sat on the edge, trembling violently. After a time I hunted out my travelling brandy flask and mixed myself a stiff dose with some aqua minerale. Ultimately I must have got back into bed.

The chambermaid had brought my coffee, picked up my dressing-gown from the floor in front of the window, and departed with a puzzled expression. I sipped and reflected. It could all have been a nightmare, of course, generated by the odd encounters of the previous day and a very good dinner, and harrowing enough to get me out of bed in a half-conscious state. And if it wasn't? I admitted this possibility and felt rather at a loss. Assuming that the supernatural were "out," one had to fall back on scientific explanations. Modern scientific theories of the nature of time were—and are—completely beyond me. All the same, one could see that there might be more to it than the simple chronological sequence of past, present, and future, and perhaps I had somehow become involved in a kind of overlap of past and present, like those women at the Trianon? Finally I resolved on that comfortable course of inaction known as keeping an open mind, and proceeded to get up and carry out my intention of painting in the Piazza Minerva.

The light was good and the sketch went well, in spite of the distraction of the usual ring of onlookers. The only unusual occurrence was that on no fewer than three occasions something seemed to pass swiftly through the air, only a few feet from my face. Each time I looked up sharply in a kind of reflex action, but there was nothing to be seen and the onlookers appeared completely unmoved. I found these incidents disturbing and difficult to shake off by reasoning.

It was not until I was packing up and preparing to go in search of lunch that I saw the cat. It was on a windowsill, a good four feet above my head, sitting in the same upright position and staring straight before it. Reaching up and touching it was impossible, so I tried to test its reality by speaking to it, or rather

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by making encouraging noises, as my colloquial Italian does not run to cat-talk. It paid not the smallest attention.

After the siesta I went out again, leaving the sketch on an easel in my bedroom. When I returned just before dinner both easel and sketching-block were on the floor. I stood just inside the door, a sharp pricking sensation on the backs of my hands. Then, crossing the room, I picked up the block. Near the top there were some scratches and two small holes which penetrated quite deeply into the layers of paper. I replaced it on the easel, my hands trembling a little, and retrieved several objects which had fallen from the dressing-table. Then I closed the shutters and fastened them securely.

Turning back into the room I noticed for the first time a little rounded hollow in the middle of the bed. As I stared at it a light breeze from the window stirred a small feather which skimmed over the counterpane and vanished. Prolonged searching under the bed with an electric torch failed to reveal it. Frustrated, I examined the little hollow and discovered a spot of blood.

This is either the purest fantasy or really very touching, I thought. I shall buy some meat tomorrow and go and give my allies a good feed. Either way, it would be a good idea.

One of the advantages of being in a city much frequented by tourists is that people's behaviour has to be very eccentric indeed to attract notice. I had provided myself with scissors, and sat on the steps outside the Pantheon snipping ham and liver sausage into small pieces. There were murmurs of approval from a pair of obvious English women who had divined my purpose, but no one else paid any attention.

My task completed, I went down the steps to where several dirty and dilapidated cats were apparently asleep. With no conscious transition I passed between two obelisks into a small and elegantly-colonnaded courtyard. Facing me was the portico of a building which I knew to be a temple. The sunlight in the courtyard was of a blinding intensity, and the heat struck up from the ground like a blow in the face.

I followed the sheltering colonnade to the portico. Cats wearing jewelled collars came to meet me from all directions. Some leapt gracefully from little niches and platforms. Others took shape in the dimness of the temple threshold, and came out slowly, blinking a little in the bright light. In the semi-darkness behind them I discerned a great stone figure with the head of a cat and a human body, about which a white-robed acolyte was moving. Little golden bowls were scattered about the portico. I filled these with the food I had brought and stood watching the

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cats eat. Some of them were pure white or a pale sandy colour. Others had tabby markings on these colours. It was very quiet, except for a vibrant ringing sound, unlike the ringing of bells, which came at intervals from the interior of the temple. Presently the cats finished eating and began to drift away. A kitten dislodged a small golden ball from behind a pillar and began to play with enchanting grace. Suddenly the ball flashed out into the sunlight, the little creature scampering after it. Simultaneously a shadow swooped down from the open sky and there was a small thin scream. The owl beat with its wings, stirring up a little cloud of dust as it struggled to become airborne with its prey.

I ran out into the glare and struck at the bird with my hands, aware of a figure in white running to my side, and the plaintive bubbling cry of a mother cat. Startled, the owl released its hold and flew off. The kitten, which had tumbled to the ground, got unsteadily to its feet. Little spots of blood were oozing on to the fur on either side of its spine, but otherwise it seemed none the worse. It followed its parent in the direction of the temple. I turned and recognised my companion of the previous evening, and behind her the massive bulk of the Pantheon.

"You will be rewarded."

It was a statement of fact. Before I could speak she had left me and was going swiftly up the steps. I stood staring at the empty and greasy paper bags in my hand.

In due course I returned to England, to the cottage which I had bought shortly before going abroad. As I hung curtains and organised my possessions I often found my thoughts wandering to these curious—in fact, inexplicable—experiences in Rome. One day I had the idea that it would be pleasant to acquire a kitten. My cottage stood well back from the road, and on the open, south-facing side, had a long secluded half-wild garden. What could be more suitable? I mentioned the matter to Mrs. Aggett from the village, who "gave" me two mornings a week, and waited for the grapevine to go into action.

Within a week she brought me an invitation to inspect a litter at the post office cum shop, vouching for the mother's admirable mousing record, and excellent house-training of her families. I went with pleasurable anticipation. The counter flap was lifted and I penetrated the inner sanctum of the kitchen, full of the comforting, billowing heat of a coke boiler. I was quite unprepared. A huddle of tabby and black occupied a basket centrally placed before the fire. Aloof, on the rag rug, a very pale sandy kitten with exquisite tabby markings and little rusty spots

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on each side of her spine, was sitting upright and contemplative. In an uncertain voice I asked if I might have that one.

The kindly postmistress, zealous for the reputation of her strain of kittens, was dismayed. Why, Tib had never had a kitten like that before: proper funny colour, and not a bit playful, though it took its food well enough and did not seem winnicky-like. And a lady, too. The toms were a proper nuisance round the place, come the times . . .

I eventually managed to convince her that I liked the unusual colour, and was quite prepared to have the kitten spayed, although I secretly felt that it would not be necessary. A suitable cardboard box was found, punctured with air holes, and secured with stout string. I returned home carrying it carefully in my arms and, putting it down on the sheepskin rug in my sitting-room, untied the string and raised the lid. The kitten stepped out delicately, sat down once more, and surveyed me.

"I am going to call you Titi," I told her, "after Queen Nefertiti. I know that the cat goddess is Bast, but it's a name which might be misunderstood over here."

So Titi she was, and is. Having one of the sacred cats of Bast in the house is not really very different from owning an ordinary member of the aloof and lordly species. There were a few peculiarities from the start. She would never eat from a plate. All food and drink had to be served in her special bowls. She always preferred to sit up, on something raised rather than on the floor. I arranged a little platform on the verandah, where she spent sunny hours, often upright on her haunches in the familiar contemplative attitude. But I did make one frightful blunder, quite early on. I bought her a ping-pong ball, and gilded it with gold paint left over from Christmas decorations. Coaxing her into the hall, I tossed the ball down the passage leading to the kitchen. Terrified, she streaked upstairs and hid under my bed, pressing herself against the wall in the darkest corner. Cursing myself for a fool, I spent the next few days in the most subtle psychological nursing of which I was capable. Eventually Titi seemed her normal self again, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Fortunately, ours is not a village of tall trees, and the possible owl trouble that I had anticipated did not materialise.

A year slipped past, two years. Titi grew lithe and elegant, with a beautiful, interesting coat, and huge amber eyes. She was much admired, even by the postmistress, but never left my cottage and garden. No toms visited her, after one of the village Lotharios had called soon after her arrival. He crept through the hedge and came upon her in the dusk, seated on her

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verandah platform in what I call her temple attitude. He promptly fled, belly to the ground.

My cottage stands—or rather, stood—at the far end of the village. When I bought it, it was bordered by a field on one side, but I realised that building development there was inevitable sooner or later. Eventually a plot of land was sold at a price beyond my resources, and a bungalow began to go up. I comforted myself with the thought that a bungalow was less obtrusive than a house, and that the good thick hedge between us was mine. In due course an elderly retired couple took possession and seemed likely to be most inoffensive neighbours.

It was not for some days after they had moved in that I noticed that Titi had developed a curious new habit. A small gap in the hedge gave directly on to the side window of the bungalow's sitting-room. Abandoning her beloved platform, she began to sit near this gap for hours at a stretch, apparently keeping a close watch on somebody or something. As the days passed her vigils became longer, and I even began to have difficulty in getting her in at night. Furtive inspections on my own account revealed nothing that could explain her absorption. Then, one night, she did not come in at all.

I came down in my dressing-gown at six o'clock the next morning, and opened the french window. She jumped lightly from the platform, hurried into the house, and ate a large breakfast in a preoccupied way. She hardly seemed aware of my existence and went straight off again to her observation post. I felt absurdly hurt, and also worried at the thought of leaving her all day, but I had to go to a meeting in the neighbouring town.

Usually, if I had been away for any length of time Titi would stroll graciously to meet me on my return, but on this occasion there was no sign of her. I unlocked the front door and went towards the sitting-room to put down my handbag and papers. Still holding the doorhandle, I stopped: a dead owl lay on the mat in front of the french window. One of its wings had been torn off, and feathers were littered over the floor. And before I could investigate further, from somewhere in the cottage came a sound which translated me straight back into the terror of that nightmare—call it what you will—in my bedroom in Rome: the rapid splintering of wood. Just as I had gripped the bedrail then, so now I gripped the doorpost while my flesh crept. I suppose I stood there until a sharp rap on the front door made me start so violently that I tingled all over.

I do not know even now what I expected as I flung the door wide open. The little man outside looked startled. He wore enormous horn-rims and was completely bald on top. Even in

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that moment of tension his resemblance to Robertson Hare made me look involuntarily for the well-known boater rotating uncertainly in his hands.

"I must apologise for disturbing you. I should not have dreamed of it if the—er—circumstances had not—er—seemed to warrant the intrusion." I suppose I looked blank to the point of discouragement, for he hurried on even more nervously.

"We are, of course—er—neighbours. That is to say, my wife and I. At Sunnyglow, you know." He indicated the bungalow.

Pulling myself together, I apologised hastily for not recognising him, making some fatuous remark about not having seen much of his wife and himself so far. "Won't you come in?" I said.

"Oh no, I won't trouble you by coming in. I assure you I would never have come on my own account, but my wife is a little distressed. Yes. I am afraid it's your pussycat. She has—er—made off with our owl, you know. She jumped in at the lounge window this afternoon."

Appalled by the thought of the carnage on the mat, I decided nevertheless that the situation had got to be faced.

"I simply can't tell you how sorry I am," I said genuinely. "I think you had better come in and see, and then we can decide what to do, to spare your wife's feelings. Titi has never killed a bird before to my knowledge."

"Killed?" There was a note of surprise in his voice. "Dear me, I fear I have misled you. Yes, indeed. Only a stuffed owl, I am glad to say, but a valued possession. On sentimental grounds only, of course."

He was down on his knees, collecting the pieces and tut-tutting. The splintering noise began again in the background. My head reeled.

"... came from my wife's great-uncle. He left us everything, most kindly, so the owl came with all the other things."

At last, feeling almost at breaking-point, I got him out of the house, announcing that I should call in the morning to discuss the present that I insisted on giving to Sunnyglow to replace the owl.

I shut the front door behind him, took a deep breath, and went to investigate the noise. It was clearly coming from the kitchen. I went in. Titi lay on her side on the floor, close to an old-fashioned wooden cupboard that I had bought with the cottage. She was attacking it furiously with her sharp claws. Fragments and thin slivers of wood lay around. As I watched, a larger piece suddenly came away. A bright golden meteor shot across the room and out into the passage, followed by Titi herself, dusty, triumphant, and lissom as a young tiger, leaping and pouncing and tossing up her golden ball.

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UNKIND CUT

English roast beef is one reason why some Americans cross the Atlantic

BY HENRY CECIL

IN EARLIER days Charles might have been described, somewhat unfairly, as a ladies' man. Unfairly, because the word usually has and had a slightly unpleasant significance. All right perhaps on the stage, when the character was played by a famous actor, but otherwise suggesting a person whom most men and many women would cordially dislike.

Charles was not at all such a person. He was generally popular and his relationship with women can perhaps be best and most fairly described by saying that he had confidence with them.

His confidence not only made him at ease when talking to them but swiftly put them at ease too. It is going too far to say that a prisoner would rather have five years from a judge who obviously meant to give it to him than to receive a lesser sentence from a judge who was " not quite sure what to do with you."

Undoubtedly confidence breeds confidence, and a judge who feels sure that he should give judgment for the plaintiff and makes it plain that he feels sure about it has more chance of persuading the unsuccessful defendant of the righteousness of the decision than the judge who says something like:

This is a very difficult case and I do not hesitate to say that I have several times in the course of it had to change my ideas. Indeed, even now, I have considerable doubt as to the correctness of the view which I am about to express. However, doing the best I can and recognising that another judge might have given a completely different decision, I have come to the conclusion on balance and, as I have said, not without hesitation, et cetera, et cetera.

In such a case the unsuccessful party is not at all consoled by his counsel informing him that he very nearly won. Losing—when you have nearly won—is far worse than never getting near a win at all.

And so it is, not only in the Courts but in daily life, and the

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man who displays an attractive confidence finds many friends. The easy persuasiveness of a great advocate is a most useful quality to possess. And undoubtedly Charles, though not a lawyer, had it.

He was much in demand at cocktail parties where, within a few seconds of introduction to a woman, he would be on apparently intimate terms with her. Most people like talking about themselves and cocktails are no discouragement. In consequence quite a number of men learn about the private affairs of complete strangers after, say, four or five Martinis. Applying that yardstick, one could fairly say that Charles was a one-Martini man.

He seldom talked about himself, except to draw the person to whom he was talking, and there was almost nothing that some women would not tell him after quite a short acquaintanceship.

Charles would have been inhuman if he had not realised his gifts, and he became supremely confident and sure of himself. So, if he was to have a fall, it was likely to be a heavy one.

One evening he took a few friends to dinner and they included an American and his charming and attractive American wife. Charles took them to the best restaurant he could think of. Unfortunately that is not very difficult in London. Over the drinks before dinner, Charles' guests selected what they would have to eat and the Americans disregarded without hesitation the more exotic dishes and chose roast beef. Charles was not surprised, as he knew that English roast beef is one of the reasons why some Americans cross the Atlantic.

It was a very pleasant evening and Charles made full use of his charms. There appeared no doubt at all that the ladies in the party all fell for him, while the men found him a most agreeable host. He provided entertainment of every kind for such an occasion.

When at last the party broke up, Charles drove the Americans back to their hotel. When they arrived he helped them out of the car, shook hands with the husband and kissed the wife. They were going back to America the next day and very possibly they would never meet again, and certainly not for a long time.

No husband could have objected to Charles' familiarity.

The wife, so far from objecting, responded with interest and, in spite of his years of confidence, Charles could not help feeling pleased that he had made an impression in so short a time. He even began to wish that the husband would take a stroll, so that he could repeat the experience. But this was impossible. So

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he contented himself by maintaining the clinch as long as was decent before they separated.

Then the attractive young woman started to say something and Charles began to think of the strongest reply that he could make without either annoying the husband or too grossly exaggerating.

The girl was obviously going to say something like, "You're rather sweet," or something he could treasure with the memory of the embrace. He kept quite a small store of such memories and pleasantly recalled them to himself when he had nothing better to do.

And then she spoke. It took Charles several days to recover.

"That was the most lovely roast beef I've ever eaten," she said.

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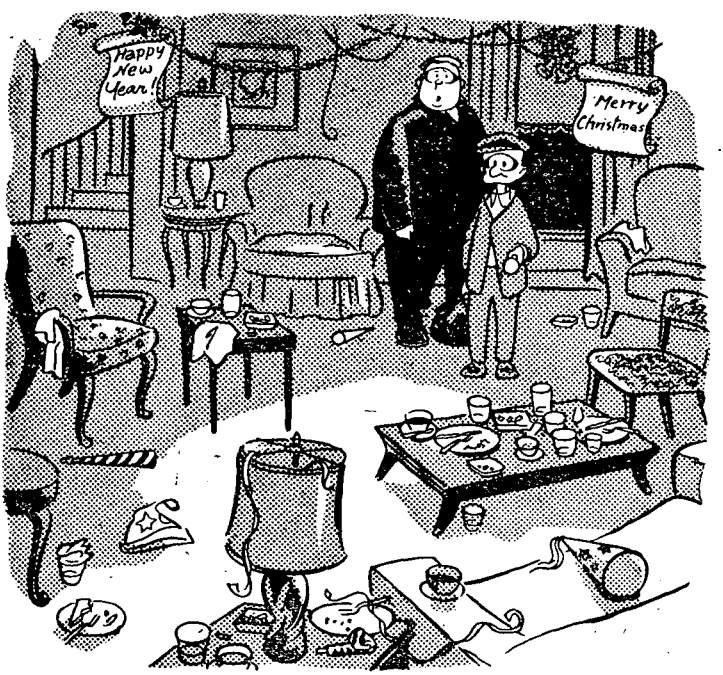
Butch the Burglar



"Let's go somewhere else. I don't think they'll be in any mood for burglars tonight."

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Was it Miss Peacock?

MISS MARY PEACOCK, wearing her old black coat over her second-best blue dress, holding her handbag very tightly, looked forward to a pleasant afternoon. To be walking in the February sunshine with her white head bare, to be looking into the shop windows with a delicious sense of power, was most delightful.

A tall form came up behind her on the right and did not pass. Another tall form loomed on her left. "Ma'am?" Miss Peacock's feet faltered, her heart jumped. They were uniformed policemen.

"What? What is it?" she gasped.

"Wonder if you'd mind coming back with us a little way? A couple of questions?" The voice was in no way cross, but it wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"But . . . if you please? I don't understand."

"Help us out. A police matter." The voice wasn't telling much. It wasn't pleading, either.

"Well, certainly, if I . . . If I can." She was bewildered, but since they were policemen, she told herself that there was no need to be frightened. Miss Peacock let them turn her about and all three walked in a moving spotlight of curious glances. She was glad to think that she need not feel mortified. Nobody knew her. She knew nobody. Between the tall men, Miss Peacock tried to lengthen and hurry her stride; when at last they took her into a doorway, she was out of breath.

The place was a lingerie shop, just a slot, long and narrow, with one aisle, one counter, and one wall of shelving. On a stool, deep within, there sat a woman. Another policeman leaned beside her.

The woman lifted a mass of improbable red hair, and from her painted face a pair of angry brown eyes inspected Miss Peacock. Almost at once she cried out, in a hoarse and furious voice, "That's her! That's the dirty old birdy! You got her!"

Miss Peacock staggered. Then a man in a brown suit whirled in from the street, nodded to all the policemen, and said cheerfully, "Miller's my name. Detective. Police. Now, what's all this?"

"I'll tell you." The redhead's furious voice gained still more volume and her hands and shoulders began to move dramatically.

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Was it perhaps the perfect crime?
The verdict is yours

By CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

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" I'm Naomi Nelson and this is my place. So I get here to open up, first thing this morning, and here's this old birdy waiting to get in. I'm not open yet, see! It's not nine o'clock. But I got a kind heart. Yah. No sooner do we get in the door, she pulls this gun on me. Look at her! You wouldn't believe it! "

" Gun? " said the man in the brown suit.

" We found a gun," said one of the policemen, " in the dust-bin on the corner. Pair of grey silk gloves, also."

" That's right," cried Naomi. " Gloves and all. A real pro, that's grandma here. Right away she backs me into the stock room, behind the curtain. I mean . . .! First thing in the morning! I'm scared about green. I fainted dead away.

" When I come to, here I am on the floor in the stock room, and has she got me tied up, but good! Pair of panties in my mouth. Ugh! Stocking round my jaw. See the marks? Hands and feet. Look at my wrists! I'm a wreck. And talk about brass. All I got on me, see, is the change for the register. So what does grandma do? She takes over, that's all, and all morning, I'm telling you, I'm lying in there and she's waiting on my customers and taking in the money. On top of this, she's got the air-conditioner running for the noise, so nobody can hear me trying to moan and groan. I could've passed out, you know . . ."

The man in the brown suit said, " How did you get free, Miss? "

" Well, see, I always get a lunch hour rush and then it dies down. Real down. So about a quarter to one, it must have been, some man comes in and starts calling, ' Hullo. Hullo.' So I know she's gone and I bang around in there and he finds me. She's gone all right, but she didn't get far. I got to hand it to you cops. You're good, I'll say that. You got her. That's her, all right. Hiya, grandma," said Naomi, viciously.

Everyone in the shop now looked at Miss Peacock.

" I don't know anything about this," she said. "I've never seen this . . . this young woman. I've never been in here before."

" Hah hah," Naomi let out a theatrical laugh.

" Can you identify yourself, ma'am? " asked the man in the brown suit.

" I am Mary Peacock. Miss Peacock. I don't quite . . . Beyond stating who I am, how can I identify . . . ? "

" A driver's licence? "

" I don't have one, sir. I have a l-library card." Miss Peacock was rummaging hopefully in her purse. " They may know me there. I have a bank book, of course, but not with me. There is my landlord. I am rather at a loss," said Miss Peacock, not without spirit. " This woman is simply mistaken."

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"I'd know her in hell," said Naomi passionately.

The man in the brown suit moved between them and asked Miss Peacock to empty her handbag on the counter. So she plucked out her clean handkerchief, scented from her sachet, her compact, and her lipstick. She took out her purse, her wallet. The coins were heavy. The bills were a five and a one. She showed her library card. Her fingers found the pearl-handled pocket knife she always carried. One of her brothers . . . all dead, all gone . . . had given it to her, sixty years ago. Then a small salt box, only an inch or so high, with a shaker top. A small packet of cleansing tissues. A roll of mints for the breath. The Order of Worship from last Sunday's service. A small circle of wire strung with little brass safety pins. Then, and finally, a folded wad of paper money, from the side pocket.

"Hah hah," cried Naomi, who was breathing down the man's neck. "There it is. That's my money."

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Peacock. "This is my money."

"Why is it separate?" the man wanted to know.

Miss Peacock, who was trembling, steadied herself. "I manage on a budget quite . . . quite well. Whenever, in any given week, there is something left over, I put it aside. There are fifty-one dollars in bills, and eighty-nine cents which I added to my other change. I have it with me because I had intended to buy a coat today."

Then the redhead seemed to be shouting scorn, the men began to confer, the place was noisy, crowded, stifling. People were peering in from the pavement. Miss Peacock felt as if she had fallen into a whirlpool. She began to put her things back into her handbag, clinging to this much order.

Then, at last, she was breathing cooler air. The man in the brown suit was putting her into his car. The staring faces frightened her. But when they were moving off, she pulled her wits together and said, "What is going to happen, now, please?"

The man said, "They'll take the girl to the station and have her statement typed out. They'll also hunt round for some customer who was in there this morning, and might have seen you. The girl can't give us names. She couldn't see."

"And what are you doing with me in the meantime?"

"I'm checking your alibi." She did not respond, and in a moment he said, "Do you understand what I mean, ma'am?"

But Miss Peacock had understood too well. "Sir," she said, "I have no alibi. I came to California only two months ago, from Philadelphia, where I have lived all my life. I am a librarian, retired. During the last few winters I've been having an annual

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bout of flu, and there is no one to take care of me. So I came here. I live alone. I have no relatives, no friends, or even acquaintances, anywhere near. No one will have noticed me, during this morning or any other."

"You are not invisible, Miss Peacock," he said sharply.

"I may as well be."

"You can remember what you did this morning?"

"Of course. But I cannot prove it. And you can't, either."

"We'll see," he said.

He stopped the car at her apartment building. Miss Peacock's hand was not steady with the key in the lock on the second floor, but she finally managed. The man in the brown suit looked round her bed-sitting-room—furnished—into her tiny kitchenette, the bath, the cupboard.

"It is old," said Miss Peacock, "but the paint is fresh, after all, and the rent is moderate. It suits me."

He said, "O.K. Start at the beginning. This morning?"

"I awoke," she said, a bit childishly.

He was unperturbed. "When?"

"I really can't tell you. I try these days to sleep as late as I can." She nibbled on her dry lips. "First, I put the coffee on. I took my shower. Then I made my bed and prepared my breakfast, ate it. I was quite alone, of course."

"Did you open your door for any reason at all?"

"Why, to bring in my quart of milk. But there was no one in the hall. I saw nobody. Nobody saw me."

"Go on."

"Then, I tidied up the kitchen. I washed out some things. I took them up to the roof to hang in the air. But there was nobody on the roof. I was not seen."

"What time was this?"

"About ten, I should say. I returned and attended to my plants. I nipped off the dying leaves and I turned them."

The man in the brown suit stepped to her windowsill and inspected her three plants. A sweet potato, in water, which was sprouting nicely. One African violet, on the shady end. A geranium slip she had started in a can, a gawky thing that leaned away from the light.

"I see they have been turned," he said.

"And I could have done that yesterday," said Miss Peacock tartly.

He glanced at her. He moved to finger the four library books on her table. "Murder mysteries? A librarian?"

"We are human," said Miss Peacock. "I enjoy them."

"All right," he said meekly. "Go on."

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" I have a chop for my dinner. Nevertheless, I went to the market and bought food for my luncheon, to eat in the park. The sun is so very nice in the middle of the day. I sit near the drinking fountain. I know it is rather a gipsy thing to do . . ."

The man said, " And then? " He looked as if he were struggling not to smile.

" I sat there some time, contemplating my purchase, you know. Anticipation is so great a part of one's pleasure. At last, I walked over to the shopping street. And you," said Miss Peacock abruptly, " know the rest." She sat down suddenly, feeling rather exhausted.

" How much is your income, may I ask? "

She told him. It was very small. " I can manage," she insisted. " I am frugal. As a matter of fact, I enjoy the effort and all the little victories." Miss Peacock was not sure about the expression on his face, whether it was doubt or pity, but she hadn't asked for pity. " I suppose my life has become very much constricted, very narrow, as most lives do, when they are drawing towards an end. That is not to say that I don't appreciate every drop of it."

" I see," he said, in an odd way.

" You must also see," said Miss Peacock spunkily, " that I am right. I have no alibi. It is hopeless to try to prove anything that I have told you."

" I don't know about that," he said, " since I haven't tried, yet."

The woman who answered the neighbouring door was stout and fresh of face. The man in the brown suit was well-spoken and respectful. Mrs. Bradley was perfectly willing to answer his questions. " Well, no, I didn't see her, this morning. Miss Peacock, did you say? How ja do? "

" How do you do? " said Miss Peacock with numb lips.

" But I heard her in her shower, I know that, if it helps . . ."

" At what time, ma'am? "

" Well, I couldn't say exactly. I was rushing around, myself. Before eight-thirty, that's for sure. I had to go out then."

" Did you see a bottle of milk at her door? "

" Any time I get out of this place that early, I'm still practically blind. I guess I didn't notice."

" Then you can't give an exact time when you were sure that Miss Peacock was in her apartment? Were you sure, by the way, that it was she? "

" Why sure, I'm sure. She sings. In the shower. ' Ancient of Days ' and things like that. These walls . . ."

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Miss Peacock spoke painfully, "I am very sorry. I had no idea."

"Oh no, now, listen," said Mrs. Bradley, "don't stop. I like to hear the old hymns. They take me back. Don't stop. Gee, I'm sorry . . ." Mrs. Bradley's round face took on the pout of a child deprived.

Marvelling a little, Miss Peacock let the man in the brown suit lead her up two flights to the roof. There was another tenant up there, a youngish woman, struggling with some slippery pink garments, some clothespegs, and her basket.

Her name was Mrs. Terry Payne, she told the man, and no, she had not met Miss Peacock before. Oh, she had seen her. Not this morning. "Only thing I can say," said Mrs. Terry Payne, "she must have hung out her things after nine forty-five. That's when I hung out mine, and hers weren't up here then."

"You recognise her things, then, do you?"

"Oh sure," said Mrs. Terry. "Listen, I've noticed them before. See, I'm a sucker," she said candidly. "Always wish I wouldn't fall for so many bargains and end up with such junk. Look at her underwear!"

Miss Peacock stood upon the roof, not knowing whether to be mortified or not.

"Real dainty," said this unknown woman. "Quality. The kind to last. Oh well, I got no sense, really." She sighed. "If that's all . . .?" She left them.

The man in the brown suit asked Miss Peacock, politely, if she would care to take her things down to her apartment, now that they were dry, and freshen up, perhaps? He would meet her in the lobby. Miss Peacock did all this, thinking hard.

Afterwards, coming down the one flight, she could hear her landlord speaking.

"Minds her business. No complaints. No trouble. And I'll tell you something else. Pays her rent smack on the first day of the month. I'm sorry I didn't happen to see her, this morning. Oh, Miss Peacock. Listen, if there's anything I can do . . ."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Gould," said Miss Peacock. "But I am in this gentleman's competent hands."

The gentleman in the brown suit said, sternly, "What about mail?" He was looking at the row of brass boxes.

"I receive very little personal mail," said Miss Peacock, "and none this morning. There was a circular, addressed to The Occupant. I threw it in a litter bin on the way to market. Proving nothing."

"True," he said, ruefully. He led her out of the building. "Which way to market?"

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As they walked together down the familiar streets, she said, "Even a thief, I presume, might take a shower. As for my wash, how can you prove *I* hung it there?"

"I can't," he said, carelessly, watching on all sides. He stopped at the corner filling-station. "Do you know this lady?" he asked the man at the pump.

"Well, I've seen her," said the garage man, nodding to Miss Peacock cordially. "I guess she's a neighbour. Right? She goes by, pretty near every day."

"Did you see her go by this morning?"

"Huh?" The garage man wanted to know why he was asked, and when he found out that it was police business he became very cautious. "I'd say I probably did. But I can't swear. Too easy to get mixed-up, when you're busy. Sorry, ma'am."

"It's quite proper to be careful," said Miss Peacock, amiably.

The man turned and said to the detective, "Gee, I wish I *could* swear. I've got two girls at home. Seems to me I spend half my life, trying to get them to stand up straight. I keep telling them, 'Look at the actresses.' I keep telling them, 'It's not only healthier, it's prettier.' Every time I see this lady walking by, I think of how I wish I could get it through their heads, so they'll walk like her some day."

His face was red with the embarrassment of being so open and personal. He nodded and turned away to his duties.

Miss Peacock and the detective walked on. Her back was straight and her feet were light.

It was a huge supermarket. The girl at the check-out stand had her blonde hair in an enormous beehive. Under it, her face looked pinched and small and shrewd. The man in the brown suit spoke his piece and the girl said, "Yeah. What I mean is I've seen her, lots of times. Um," said the girl, "and many is the time I wish I could belt some of these people a good one in their jaw. *She's* a lady. I notice that."

"Oh?"

"Listen, what I mean, she don't buy much, but she waits her turn. And some of these big fat mamas, with two carts full of stuff to check out, they haven't got the kindness to step aside and let her through." The girl wiggled and scratched her scalp with a pencil. "Burns me up," she said.

"Did you see her in here this morning, Miss?"

"I dunno," said the girl. "*Was* you in here?"

Miss Peacock had nodded before the man could stop her.

"Sure, I saw her," said the girl loudly, looking very wide-eyed and exactly like a liar.

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"At what time?"

"This morning." The girl shrugged.

"What did she buy?"

The girl's lashes quivered. "A Spanish onion," she said loudly, and her eyes slid to Miss Peacock, to see whether she had guessed correctly. A look of delighted mischief came upon her face, which she put down immediately. "Listen," she said, all innocence, "how I remember . . . One time, I says to her, 'What do you do with all those onions?' I says to her. I'm kidding, see? She buys one at a time. Well, she tells me she eats them raw in a sandwich because they're healthy. So I remember. Right?"

Miss Peacock swallowed. "Yes, I, too, remember that conversation. Several weeks ago." She smiled at the girl.

"And she looks healthy," burst the girl. "A lot of old people are creeps, you know? But not her. *I'll* swear," she said.

The man thanked her gravely and led Miss Peacock away. She met his eye and had to smile.

"Not a good witness," she pronounced. "She was obviously guessing."

"Did she guess right?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. I bought two flat rolls, one smallish tomato, and a medium-sized Spanish onion. I have my little knife. You saw it. A little salt. I made myself the sandwiches in the park."

He goggled at her. "Somebody ought to remember *that*," he burst.

"I doubt it," said Miss Peacock, gently.

They walked on into the little square park and the man looked about at the grass, the trees, the drinking fountain. "See anybody who was here this morning?"

Miss Peacock sank down upon her accustomed bench. "Yes, I think so," she said in a moment. "Two of the children. That blue little girl, and the green one."

The man in the brown suit walked away. He had no sooner squatted down to speak to the little girls on their own level, when a young woman came hurrying out of a house, opposite, and across the grass.

Miss Peacock watched, almost dreamily. The man evidently made his routine speech. The young woman, at first hostile, began to speak in her turn. Suddenly she lifted her arm and hailed another young woman who was just parking a car. This one came to them. The children, meantime, ran off to play. Soon, the two young women and the man in the brown suit came drifting into Miss Peacock's range of hearing.

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"You have kids, you keep an eye on who is in the park, believe me," said the first woman. "I've seen her. Not this morning, though. I don't say she wasn't here. But I had an appointment at the beauty parlour and it's a scramble. Sally Jo was going to watch the kids. When I got home, I gave them lunch and watched them, while she went to the dentist. We kind of take it in turns for each other, on a school holiday."

"That's right," said the other one, whose face had a lopsided, novocained look. "She might have been here when I took off. I wouldn't want to say for sure. How about the kids?"

"They are willing to say she was or she wasn't," said the man, "depending upon what's wanted. How old are they?"

"Seven," chimed their mothers, in twin voices of despair.

"But neither of you," said the man, rather anxiously, "noticed her making and eating her lunch, there on that bench today?"

The two shook their heads. The one with the new hair-do said, impulsively, "I know you can't tell by looks, but I've always kind of liked her looks. For what it's worth."

The one with the novocaine said, "Me, too. I've got no intention of growing old, mind, but if I ever do . . ." They both peered round him at Miss Peacock.

Miss Peacock was sitting there, erect, as was her habit. The sun was lowering, it did not give much warmth. But she felt warm and extraordinarily comfortable. Although this was the end of the quest, she had no alibi at all, she was in the hands of the police, and the victim of a crime was insisting that she was a criminal. How odd, she thought. How very strange.

"Come on," begged the novocained woman. "She didn't do it, did she? I don't want to believe that."

Then the hair-do woman snapped her fingers. She had thought of something. "Lunch," she cried. "Don't tell me anything. Let me tell you. When I hailed the kids in I asked them what they'd like. O.K. They absolutely had to have a bun sandwich with tomato and some raw onion."

"What?" shrieked the novocained one. "You didn't give it to them, Barbie?"

"I sure did," said Barbie, the hair-do. "Why not? I didn't have a bun, of course, but I sold them on plain bread. Well?" She looked at the man. "Where did they get the idea?"

"That's what she had," he admitted.

"There you are, then," said hair-do, with satisfaction.

He thanked them and dismissed them. They went drifting towards their children to gather them in. They kept looking back, and smiling.

The man in the brown suit came to Miss Peacock. He was not

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smiling. Would she mind waiting where she was while he fetched the car? Miss Peacock did not mind.

When he came back, very shortly, he put her into the seat in his polite way. Miss Peacock said, " It occurs to me that I have been trusted."

" You wouldn't get far," he said absentmindedly.

" It's no alibi, of course," she said cheerily. " The children may have seen me prepare just such a sandwich on another day. It's tenuous. It's a presumption only."

" True," he said, looking straight ahead.

" Are you taking me in? "

" Yes, I am." The man in the brown suit sighed.

Miss Peacock sighed, too, quite happily.

At the police station they came into a room where a man in a blue suit was seated at a desk talking with a seated woman who was clad in a pink nylon uniform and a white sweater. " This is Mrs. Norwood," he said, " works in the bakery a couple of doors from the lingerie shop. She bought a slip there this morning."

" Mrs. Norwood, have you seen this lady before? " asked Miss Peacock's man. He seemed to present her.

Mrs. Norwood squinted up from already squinty eyes. " I don't know, really. I don't remember." She was nervous.

" Can you say this is *not* the woman who waited on you? "

" Well, I can't say that." The pink woman twisted her hands. " I wasn't looking at her so much. I was looking at the merchandise. I just know she wasn't so young."

The man in the brown suit was feeling exasperated. Miss Peacock could sense that. So she put her hands on the desk and leaned to ask, " Do you recognise my voice, then? "

The woman said, " No. No. I got no ear, honest. I just can't say, one way or the other. I can't help it."

" Of course not," said Miss Peacock, comfortingly.

The man in the blue suit cleared his throat and looked at the man in the brown suit, who rolled his eyes. But Miss Peacock was imagining. " You were looking at the merchandise," she said. " But you must have seen the hands. Were they gloved? "

" Gloved! For heaven's sakes, I'd have noticed a thing like that." Mrs. Norwood looked down at Miss Peacock's hands. " Well," she proclaimed, suddenly radiant and decisive, " I can't swear as to who it *was*, but I'll tell you it wasn't *this* lady."

" How is that? " demanded the man in the brown suit.

" Because I saw her fingernails chewed down about as far as they could go. And look! "

Miss Peacock's nails were discreetly a medium length, immaculate, softly aglow with a colourless polish.

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The man in the blue suit said, more or less sotto voce, " By the way, we got a line on the gun. M.O. paid off, too. Same thing, over in Glendale. There's a suspect."

" Be with you as soon as I take Miss Peacock home."

In the car, Miss Peacock said, " Of course, it is the word of Mrs. Norwood against a positive identification."

He grunted.

" And it is the truth, is it not, sir, that you still cannot prove that I was anywhere else but in that shop, this morning? "

" That's right," he said grumpily.

" It would be up to a jury . . ." she began.

Then he burst out, " There'll be no jury. You read too much. I know."

" But . . ."

" It adds up. There's such a thing as character. As reputation. I know, I tell you. You didn't do it. I've known that for hours. So will you please . . ." Then he muttered, " Excuse me."

Miss Peacock became demurely silent. He handed her out of the car and said, contritely, " I want to apologise, Miss Peacock, if I was a little bit annoyed. And I apologise for all this trouble."

" Oh no, sir," cried Miss Peacock. " Pray don't apologise for one minute. I've had a perfectly marvellous afternoon." She held out her hand. He bowed so low, he just missed putting its dainty fingertips to his kiss. Miss Mary Peacock withdrew graciously, and walked, like a queen, into her castle, in a town where she was better than visible, she had been seen through.

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DOUBLE ENTENDRE!

Whenever Napoleon saw a man he didn't recognise, he always fired three questions at him in the same order: " How old are you? How long have you been serving? Did you serve in either of my last two campaigns? "

Not being able to speak French, a Swedish recruit was coached by his pals in the correct replies, but when Napoleon spotted him, for once he put his questions in the wrong order.

" How long have you been serving? " he asked.

The Swede replied, " Twenty-three years."

" Tiens! " exclaimed Napoleon. " How old are you? "

" Three years, sir."

" Sacré tonnerre! " cried Napoleon. " Either you are mad or I am."

" Both," said the Swede.

M. E. CLIFTON JAMES, *I Was Monty's Double*

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STICKEEN

by JOHN MUIR

IN THE summer of 1880, I set out from Fort Wrangell in a canoe, with the Rev. S. H. Young, my former companion, and a crew of Indians, to continue the exploration of the icy region of south-eastern Alaska, begun in the fall of 1879. After the necessary provisions, blankets, et cetera, had been collected and stowed away, and the Indians were in their places ready to dip their paddles, while a crowd of their friends were looking down from the wharf to bid them good-bye and good luck, Mr. Young, for whom we were waiting, at length came aboard, followed by a little black dog that immediately made himself at home by curling up in a hollow among the baggage.

I like dogs, but this one seemed so small, dull, and worthless that I objected to his going, and asked the missionary why he was taking him. "Such a helpless wisp of hair will only be in the way," I said; "you had better pass him up to one of the Indian boys on the wharf, to be taken home to play with the children. This trip is not likely to be a good one for toy dogs. He will be rained on and snowed on for weeks, and will require care like a baby."

The missionary assured me that he would be no trouble at all; that he was a perfect wonder of a dog—could endure cold and hunger like a polar bear, swim like a seal, and was wondrous wise.

Nobody could hope to unravel the lines of his ancestry. He was short-legged, bunchy-bodied, and almost featureless. Though smooth, his hair was long and silky, so that when the wind was at his back it ruffled, making him look shaggy. At first sight his only noticeable feature was his showy tail, which was

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about as shady and airy as a squirrel's, and was carried curling forward nearly to his ears. On closer inspection you might see his thin, sensitive ears and his keen dark eyes with cunning tan spots.

Mr. Young told me that the dog had been presented to his wife by an Irish prospector at Sitka, and that when he arrived at Fort Wrangell he was adopted by the Stickeen Indians as a sort of new good-luck totem, and named " Stickeen " after the tribe.

On our trip he soon proved himself a queer character—odd, concealed, independent, keeping invincibly quiet, and doing many inexplicable things that piqued my curiosity. Sailing week after week through the long, intricate channels and inlets among the innumerable islands and mountains of the coast, he spent the dull days in sluggish ease, motionless, and apparently as unobserving as a hibernating marmot. But I discovered that somehow he always knew what was going forward.

When the Indians were about to shoot at duck or seals, or when anything interesting was to be seen along the shore, he would rest his chin on the edge of the canoe and calmly look out. When he heard us talking about making a landing, he roused himself to see what sort of place we were coming to, and made ready to jump overboard and swim ashore as soon as the canoe neared the beach. Then, with a vigorous shake to get rid of the brine in his hair, he went into the woods to hunt small game. Always the first out of the canoe, he was always the last to get into it. When we were ready to start he could never be found, and refused to come to our call. We soon found out that though we could not see him at such times, he saw us, and from the cover of the briers and huckleberry bushes in the fringe of the woods was watching the canoe with wary eye.

As soon as we were fairly off, he came trotting down the beach, plunged into the surf, and swam after us, knowing that we would cease rowing and take him in. We tried to cure him of this trick by compelling him to swim farther before stopping for him; but the longer the swim, the better he seemed to like it.

When the Indians went into the woods for a deer, Stickeen was sure to be at their heels, provided I had not yet left camp. For though I never carried a gun, Stickeen always insisted on following me, gliding through the dripping huckleberry bushes and prickly *panax* and *rubus* tangles like a fox, scarce stirring their close-set branches, wading and wallowing through snow, swimming ice-cold streams, jumping logs and rocks and the crusty hummocks and crevasses of glaciers with the patience and endurance of a determined mountaineer, never tiring or getting discouraged.

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Once he followed me over a glacier the surface of which was so rough that it cut his feet, but he trotted on with Indian fortitude until I noticed his pain, and made him a set of moccasins out of a handkerchief.

Stickeen seemed to meet danger and hardships without reason, insisted on having his own way, never obeyed an order, and the hunters could never set him on anything against his will, or make him fetch anything that was shot. Let the weather blow and roar, he was as tranquil as a stone; his strength lay in his eyes. They looked as old as the hills, and as young and as wild. I never tired looking into them. It was like looking into a landscape; but they were small and rather deep-set, and had no explaining puckers round them to give out particulars. No matter what advances you made, scarce a glance or a tail-wag would you get for your pains. No superannuated mastiff or bulldog grown old in office surpassed this midget in stoic dignity. Stickeen seemed a very Diogenes, asking only to be let alone.

After we had explored the glaciers of the Sumdum and Taku inlets, we sailed through Stephen's Passage into Lynn Canal, and thence through Icy Strait into Cross Sound, looking for unexplored inlets leading towards the ice-fountains of the Fairweather Range. While the tide was in our favour in Cross Sound, we were accompanied by a fleet of icebergs drifting out to the ocean from Glacier Bay. Slowly we crawled around Vancouver's Point Wimbleton, our frail canoe tossed like a feather on the massive swells coming in past Cape Spenser.

For miles the Sound is bounded by precipitous cliffs which looked terribly stern in gloomy weather. Had our canoe been crushed or upset, we could gain no landing here; for the cliffs, as high as those of Yosemite, sink perfectly sheer into deep water. Eagerly we scanned the immense wall on the north side for the first sign of an opening, all of us anxious except Stickeen, who dozed in peace or gazed dreamily at the tremendous precipices when he heard us talking about them.

At length we discovered the entrance of what is now called Taylor Bay, and about five o'clock reached the head of it, and encamped near the front of a large glacier which extends as an abrupt barrier all the way across from wall to wall of the inlet, a distance of three or four miles. The glacier presented some unusual features, and that night I planned a grand excursion for the morrow.

I woke early, called not only by the glacier but also by a storm. Rain, mixed with trailing films of scud and ragged, drawn-out nether surfaces of grey clouds, filled the inlet, and was sweeping

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forward in a thick, passionate, horizontal flood, as if it were all passing over the country instead of falling on it. Everything was streaming with life and motion—woods, rocks, waters, and the sky. The main perennial streams were booming, and hundreds of new ones, born of the rain, were descending in grey and white cascades on each side of the inlet, streaking their rocky slopes, roaring like the sea.

I had intended making coffee before starting, but when I heard the storm I made haste to join it; in storms if we have wit to keep in right relations with them the danger is no more than in home-keeping, and we can go with them rejoicing, chanting with the old Norsemen, "The blast of the tempest aids our oars; the hurricane is our servant, and drives us whither we wish to go."

I took my ice-axe, buttoned my coat, put a piece of bread in my pocket, and set out. Mr. Young and the Indians were asleep, and so, I hoped, was Stickeen; but I had not gone a dozen rods before he came boring through the blast after me.

I stopped, turned my back to the wind, and shouted to make myself heard in the storm, "Now don't, Stickeen. Go back to camp and keep warm. There is no game abroad—nothing but weather."

I ordered him back again and again to ease my conscience. He was not to be shaken off; as well might the earth try to shake off the moon.

The dog stood there in the wind, drenched and blinking, saying doggedly, "Where thou goest I will go." So I told him to come on, if he must, and gave him a piece of the bread I had put in my pocket for breakfast. Then we pushed on in company.

The level flood, driving straight in our faces, thrashed and washed us wildly until we got into the shelter of the trees and ice-cliffs on the eastern side of the glacier, where we rested, listened and looked on in comfort. The exploration of the glacier was my main object, but the wind was too high. Here the end of the glacier, descending over an abrupt swell of resisting rock about five hundred feet high, leans forward and falls in majestic ice-cascades.

As the storm came down the glacier from the north, Stickeen and I were beneath the main current of the blast, while favourably located to see and hear it. A broad torrent, draining the side of the glacier, now swollen by scores of new streams from the mountains, was rolling boulders along its rocky channel between the glacier and the woods with thudding, bumping, muffled sounds, rushing towards the bay with tremendous energy.

Looking southward from our shelter, we had this great torrent

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on our left, with woods on the mountain slope above it, the glacier on our right, the wild, cascading portion of it forming a multitude of towers, spires, and flat-topped battlements seen through the trees, and smooth grey gloom ahead. I tried to draw the marvellous scene in my note-book.

When the wind began to abate I traced the east side of the glacier. All the trees standing on the edge of the woods were barked and bruised, showing high ice-mark in a very telling way, while tens of thousands of those that had stood for centuries on the bank of the glacier farther out lay crushed and being crushed. In many places I could see, down fifty feet or so beneath, the margin of the glacier mill, where trunks from one to two feet in diameter were being ground to pulp against outstanding rock-ribs and bosses of the bank.

About three miles above the front of the glacier, I climbed to the surface of it by means of axe-steps, made easy for Stickeen; and as far as the eye could reach, the level, or nearly level, glacier stretched away indefinitely beneath the grey sky, a seemingly boundless prairie of ice. The rain continued, which I did not mind; but a tendency to fogginess in the drooping clouds made me hesitate about venturing far from land.

No trace of the west shore was visible, and in case the misty clouds should settle, or the wind again become violent, I feared getting caught in a tangle of crevasses. Lingering undecided, watching the weather, I sauntered about on the crystal sea. For a mile or two out, I found the ice remarkably safe. The marginal crevasses were mostly narrow, while the few wider ones were easily avoided by passing around them, and the clouds began to open here and there. Thus encouraged, I at last pushed out for the other side.

At first we made rapid progress, and I took bearings occasionally with a pocket-compass, to enable me to retrace my way more surely in case the storm should become blinding; but the structure-lines of the ice were my main guide. Towards the west side we came to a closely crevassed section, in which we had to make long, narrow tracks and doublings, tracing the edges of tremendous longitudinal crevasses, many of which were from twenty to thirty feet wide, and perhaps a thousand feet deep, beautiful and awful. I was severely cautious, but Stickeen came on as unhesitatingly as the flying clouds. Any crevasse that I could jump he would leap without so much as halting to examine it.

His bunchy body seemed all one skipping muscle, and his peg legs appeared to be jointed only at the top.

The weather was bright and dark, with quick flashes of

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summer and winter close together. The clouds opened, the sun shone, and the glacier was seen from shore to shore, with a bright array of encompassing mountains partly revealed, amid clouds, black in the middle, burning on the edges, and the whole ice prairie seemed to burst into a bloom of iris colours from myriads of crystals. Suddenly all would be smothered again in gloom.

Stickeen seemed to care for none of these things, bright or dark, or for the beautiful wells filled to the brim with water so pure that it was nearly invisible, the rumbling, grinding moulins, or the quick-flashing, glinting, swirling streams in frictionless channels of living ice. Stickeen showed neither caution nor curiosity.

We gained the west shore in about three hours, the width of the glacier here being about seven miles. Then I pushed northward, in order to see as far back as possible into the fountains of the Fairweather Mountains. The walking was easy along the margin of the forest. In an hour we rounded a massive headland and came suddenly on another outlet of the glacier, which, in the form of a wild ice-cascade, was pouring over the rim of the main basin towards the ocean with the volume of a thousand Niagaras. The surface was broken into a multitude of sharp blades and pinnacles. These ice-waves were many times higher than those of river cataracts, and to all appearance motionless. It was a dazzling white torrent two miles wide, flowing between high banks with trees. Tracing its left bank three or four miles, I found that it discharged into a fresh-water lake, filling it with icebergs.

The day was waning, and we had to make haste to get off the ice before dark. When we were about two miles from the west shore the clouds dropped misty fringes, and snow soon began to fly. I began to feel anxiety as to finding a way in the storm through the intricate network of crevasses which we had entered. Stickeen showed no fear. When the storm-darkness fell he kept close behind me. The snow warned us to make haste, but at the same time hid our way. At rare intervals the clouds thinned, and mountains, looming in the gloom, frowned and quickly vanished.

I pushed on as best I could, jumping innumerable crevasses, for every hundred rods or so of direct advance I travelled a mile in doubling up and down in the turmoil of chasms and dislocated masses of ice. After an hour or two of this work we came to a series of longitudinal crevasses of appalling width, like immense furrows. These I traced with firm nerve, excited and strengthened by the danger, making wide jumps, poising cautiously on the dizzy edges after cutting hollows for my feet before making the

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spring, to avoid slipping or any uncertainty on the farther sides, where only one trial is granted—exercise at once frightful and inspiring. Stickeen flirted across every gap I jumped, seemingly without effort.

Many a mile we travelled thus, making little real headway in crossing, most of the time running instead of walking, as the danger of spending the night on the glacier became threatening. We were hungry and wet, and the north wind was thick with snow and bitterly cold. Stickeen gave me no concern. He was still ready for anything.

I could not see where the best route lay, and had simply to grope my way in the snow-choked air and ice. Again and again I was put on my mettle, but Stickeen followed easily, unflinching as the dangers thickened.

At length our way was barred by a very wide and straight crevasse, which I traced rapidly northward a mile or so without finding a crossing or hope of one, then southward down the glacier about as far, to where it united with another crevasse. In all this distance of perhaps two miles there was only one place where I could possibly jump it; but the width of this jump was the utmost I dared attempt, while the danger of slipping on the farther side was so great that I was loath to try it. The side I was on was about a foot higher than the other; even with this advantage it seemed dangerously wide. One is liable to underestimate the width of crevasses where the magnitudes in general are great. I therefore measured this one again and again, until satisfied that I could jump it if necessary . . . but in case I should be compelled to jump back to the higher side, I might fail.

A cautious mountaineer seldom takes a step he cannot retrace in case he should be stopped by unseen obstacles ahead. This is the rule of mountaineers who live long; and I compelled myself to deliberate before I broke it. I was eager to go on; but this wide jump was a tremendous obstacle.

At length, because of the dangers already behind me, I determined to venture against those that might be ahead, jumped, and landed well, but with so little to spare that I more than ever dreaded being compelled to take that jump back from the lower side. Stickeen followed, making nothing of it. But within a distance of a few hundred yards we were stopped again by the widest crevasse yet encountered.

I made haste to explore it, hoping all might yet be well. About three-fourths of a mile up-stream it united with the one we had just crossed, as I feared. Tracing it down, I found it joined the other great crevasse at the lower end, maintaining a width of forty to fifty feet.

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We were on an island about two miles long and from one hundred to three hundred yards wide, with two barely possible ways of escape—one by the way we came, the other by an almost inaccessible sliver-bridge that crossed the larger crevasse from near the middle of the island.

After tracing the brink, I ran back to the sliver-bridge and cautiously studied it. Crevasses caused by strains from variations of the rate of motion of different parts of the glacier and by convexities in the channel are mere cracks when they first open—so narrow as hardly to admit the blade of a pocketknife—and widen gradually, according to the extent of the strain. Now some of these cracks are interrupted like the cracks in wood, and, in opening, the strip of ice between overlapping ends is dragged out.

If the flow of the glacier there is such that no strain is made on the sliver, it maintains a continuous connection between the sides, just as the two sides of a slivered crack in wood that is being split are connected. Some crevasses remain open for years, and by the melting of their sides continue to increase in width long after the opening strain has ceased, while the sliver-bridges, level on top at first, and perfectly safe, are at length melted to thin, knife-edged blades, the upper portion being most exposed to the weather; and since the exposure is greatest in the middle, they at length curve downward like the cables of a suspension-bridge.

This one was very old; it had been wasted until it was the worst bridge I ever saw. The width of the crevasse was here about fifty feet, and the sliver, crossing diagonally, was about seventy feet long, depressed twenty-five or thirty feet in the middle, and the up-curving ends were attached to the sides eight or ten feet below the surface of the glacier.

Getting down the nearly vertical wall to the end of it and up the other side were the main difficulties. They seemed all but insurmountable.

We were wet to the skin and hungry, the sky dark with snow, and the night near, and we had to fear the snow in our eyes and the disturbing action of the wind in any movement we might make. But we were forced to face it. It was a tremendous necessity.

Beginning not immediately above the sunken end of the bridge, but a little to one side, I cut nice hollows on the brink for my knees to rest in; then, leaning over, with my short-handled axe cut a step sixteen or eighteen inches below, which, on account of the sheerness of the wall, was shallow. That step, however,

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was well made; its floor sloped slightly inward, and formed a good hold for my heels.

Slipping cautiously upon it, and crouching as low as possible, with my left side twisted towards the wall, I steadied myself with my left hand in a slight notch, while with the right I cut other steps and notches in succession, guarding against glinting of the axe, for life or death was in every stroke, and in the niceness of finish of every foothold.

When the end of the bridge was reached, it was a delicate thing to poise on a little platform which I had chipped on its up-curving end and, bending over the slippery surface, get astride it. Crossing was easy, cutting off the sharp edge with careful strokes, and hitching forward a few inches at a time, keeping my balance with my knees pressed against the sides. The tremendous abyss on each side I studiously ignored. The surface of that blue sliver was then all the world.

The most trying part of the adventure was, after working my way across inch by inch, to rise from the safe position astride that slippery strip of ice, and to cut a ladder in the face of the wall—chipping, climbing, holding on with feet and fingers in mere notches. At such time one's whole body is eye, and common skill and fortitude are replaced by power beyond our call or knowledge. Never before had I been so long under deadly strain. How I got up the cliff at the end of the bridge I never could tell. The thing seemed to have been done by somebody else. I never have had contempt of death, though in the course of my explorations I oftentimes felt that to meet one's fate on a mountain, in a grand canyon, or in the heart of a crystal glacier would be blessed as compared with death from disease, or a mean accident in a street. But the sweetest, cleanest death, set thus calmly and glaringly clear before us, is hard enough to face . . .

But poor Stickeen! While I was on my knees cutting away the rounded brow, Stickeen came behind me, pushed his head past my shoulder, looked down and across, scanned the sliver and its approaches with his queer eyes, then looked me in the face with a startled air of surprise and concern, and began to mutter and whine, saying plainly as if with words, "Surely you are not going to try that awful place?" This was the first time I had seen him gaze deliberately into a crevasse or into my face with a speaking look. Never before had the quick, daring midget seemed to know that ice was slippery, or that there was such a thing as danger. His looks were so human that I unconsciously talked to him in trying to calm his fears. But my sermon was far from reassuring him; he began to cry, and after taking

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another piercing look at the tremendous gulf, ran away in desperate excitement, seeking some other crossing.

By the time he got back, baffled, of course, I had made a step or two. I dared not look back, but he made himself heard; and when he saw that I was certainly crossing, he cried aloud in despair. The danger was enough to daunt anybody, but it seems wonderful that he should have been able to weigh and appreciate it so justly. No mountaineer could have seen it more quickly or judged it more wisely, discriminating between real and apparent peril.

After I had gained the other side he howled louder than ever, and after running back and forth in vain search for a way of escape, he would return to the brink of the crevasse above the bridge, moaning and groaning as if in the bitterness of death. Could this be the silent, philosophic Stickeen?

I shouted encouragement, telling him the bridge was not so bad as it looked, that I had left it flat for his feet, and he could walk it easily. But he was afraid to try it. Strange that so small an animal could be capable of such big, wise fears!

I called again and again in a reassuring tone to come on and fear nothing; that he could come if he would only try. Then he would hush for a moment, look again at the bridge, and shout his unshakable conviction that he could never, never come that way; and lie back in despair, howling.

His natural composure and courage had vanished utterly in a tumultuous storm of fear.

His heartfelt cries might well have called Heaven to his help. Perhaps they did. So hidden before, he was transparent now, and one could see the workings of his mind like the movements of a clock out of its case. His voice and gestures were perfectly human, and his hopes and fears unmistakable, while he seemed to understand every word of mine.

I was troubled at the thought of leaving him. It seemed impossible to get him to venture.

To compel him to try by fear of being left, I started off and disappeared behind a hummock; but this did no good, for he only lay down and cried. So after hiding a few minutes, I went back to the brink of the crevasse, and in a severe tone of voice shouted across to him that I could wait no longer; if he would not come, all I could promise was that I would return to seek him next day.

At last, with the courage of despair, hushed and breathless, he lay down on the brink in the hollow I had made for my knees, pressed his body against the ice to get the advantage of the friction, gazed into the first step, put his little feet together, and

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slid them slowly down into it, bunching all four in it, and almost standing on his head. Then, without lifting them, as well as I could see through the snow, he slowly worked them over the edge of the step, and down into the next and the next in succession in the same way, and gained the bridge. Then lifting his feet with the regularity and slowness of the vibration of a seconds' pendulum, as if counting and measuring one, two, three, holding himself in dainty poise, and giving separate attention to each little step, he gained the foot of the cliff, at the top of which I was kneeling to give him a lift should he get within reach.

Here he halted in dead silence, and it was here I feared he might fail, for dogs are poor climbers. I had no cord. If I had had one, I would have dropped a noose over his head and hauled him up. But while I was thinking whether an available cord might be made out of clothing, he was looking keenly into the series of notched steps and fingerholds of the ice-ladder I had made, as if counting them and fixing the position of each one in his mind. Then suddenly up he came, with a nervy, springy rush, hooking his paws into the notches and steps so quickly that I could not see how it was done, and whizzed past my head—safe at last!

"Well done, well done, little boy! Brave boy!" I cried, trying to catch and caress him; but he would not be caught. Never before or since have I seen anything like so passionate a revulsion from the depths of despair to uncontrollable, exultant, triumphant joy. He flashed and darted hither and thither as if fairly demented, screaming and shouting, swirling round and round in giddy loops and circles like a leaf in a whirlwind, lying down and rolling over and over, sideways and heels over head, pouring forth a tumultuous flood of hysterical cries and sobs and gasping mutterings. And when I ran up to him to shake him, fearing he might die of joy, he flashed off two or three hundred yards, his feet in a mist of motion; then, turning suddenly, he came back in wild rushes, and launched himself at my face, almost knocking me down, all the time screeching and screaming and shouting as if saying, "Saved! saved! saved!" Then away again, dropping suddenly at times with his feet in the air, trembling, and fairly sobbing.

I ran ahead, calling him, in as gruff a voice as I could command, to come on and stop his nonsense, for we had far to go, and it would soon be dark. The ice ahead was gashed by thousands of crevasses, but they were common ones.

The joy of deliverance burnt in us like fire, and we ran without fatigue, every muscle, with immense rebound, glorying in its strength.

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Stickeen flew across everything in his way, and not till dark did he settle into his normal fox-like, gliding trot.

At last the mountains crowned with spruce came in sight, looming faintly in the gloaming, and we soon felt the solid rock beneath our feet, and were safe. We stumbled down along the lateral moraine in the dark, over rocks and tree-trunks, through the bushes and devil-club thickets and mossy logs and boulders of the woods where we had sheltered ourselves in the morning. Then out on the level mud-slope of the terminal moraine. Danger had vanished, and so had our strength.

We reached camp about ten o'clock, and found a big fire and a big supper. A party of Hoona Indians had visited Mr. Young, bringing a gift of porpoise-meat and wild strawberries, and Hunter Joe had brought in a wild goat. We lay down, too tired to eat much, and soon fell into a troubled sleep. Stickeen kept springing up and muttering in his sleep, no doubt dreaming that he was still on the brink of the crevasse; and so did I—that night and many others, long afterward.

Thereafter Stickeen was a changed dog. During the rest of the trip, instead of holding aloof, he would come to me at night, when all was quiet about the camp-fire, and rest his head on my knee, with a look of devotion, as if I were his god. And often, as he caught my eye, he seemed to be trying to say, " Wasn't that an awful time we had together on the glacier? "

None of his old friends know what finally became of Stickeen. Most likely he has left this world—crossed the last crevasse—and gone to another.

But he will not be forgotten. Come what may, to me Stickeen is immortal.

John Muir was ten when in 1849 his family moved from Scotland to a log cabin in Wisconsin. Forbidden to read any book other than the Bible except before sunrise, he invented an ingenious collection of gadgets to ensure his early rising: bed-tipping apparatus, a wooden clock, and a revolving desk to bring his studies before him at the appointed hour. Stubbornly he worked his way to and through University, graduating in geology. He became a successful fruit grower and saw-miller, then disappeared into the Alaskan wilderness to fulfil a dream of exploration. Joining official expeditions, travelling dangerously and never shooting a wild creature even for food, his passionate love of glaciers, forests, and mountains drove him to work fanatically and successfully for the establishment of National Parks. His adventure with Stickeen is an epic of dogged courage.

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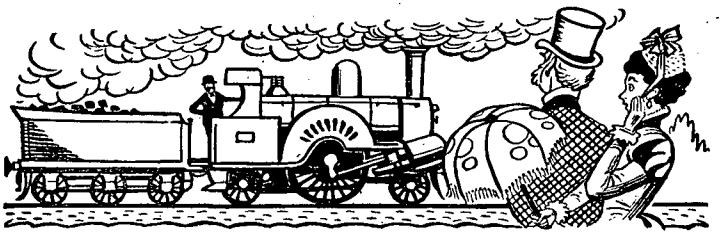

getting up STEAM

The real disgrace of England is the railway sandwich.
ANTHONY TROLLOPE, *He Knew He Was Right*

—Singing through the forests, rattling over ridges,
Shooting under arches, rumbling over bridges,
Whizzing through the mountains, buzzing o'er the vale—
Bless me! this is pleasant, riding on the rail!
J. G. SAXE, *Rhyme of the Rail*

The Loco Motive Machine

Then we went at the rate of twenty three miles an hour . . . it is really flying, and it is impossible to divest yourself of the notion of instant death to all upon the least accident happening. It gave me a headache which has not left me yet . . . The smoke is very inconsiderable indeed, but sparks of fire are abroad in some quantity: one burnt Miss de Ros's cheek, another a hole in Lady Maria's silk pelisse, and a third a hole in someone else's gown. Altogether I am extremely glad indeed to have seen this miracle . . . but I am quite satisfied with my *first* achievement being my *last.* THOMAS CREEVEY, *The Creevey Papers*

Changing Trains

Were ever engines lovelier than those?
What treasured names they bore—Sir Francis Drake,
Swallow, Lysander, Lady of the Lake,
Courier, Gladstone, Glowworm, Lorna Doone,
Titan, Apollo, Jeanie Deans, Typhoon . . .
And in their wake what rainbow splendour ran:
The bronze-green coaches of the Cambrian;
G.N.S. red and white; North Eastern "plum";
"Salmon" that struck one young observer dumb . . .

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" Each to his choice." Although my youth was bred
Amid the comfortable Midland red . . .
Yet all my exiled Western blood took fire
When—a small boy, in snowy-starched attire—
I first changed trains at Bristol (Temple Meads).
Awhile my tastes were fickle; but the seeds
Sown there have proved the stubbornest by far:
Upon my heart is graved G.W.R.

GILBERT THOMAS, *Nostalgia*

Shock Tactics

It is well to know that the bottom of the carriage is the safest place, and, therefore, when a person has reason to anticipate a concussion, he should, without hesitation, throw himself on the floor . . . Lord Guillamore saved his life and that of his fellow passengers some years since . . . on one of the Irish railways. His Lordship feeling a shock, which he knew to be the forerunner of a concussion, without more ado sprang upon the two persons sitting opposite to him, and dragged them with him to the bottom of the carriage; the astonished persons first imagined that they had been set upon by a maniac, and commenced struggling, but in a few seconds they too well understood the nature of the case; the concussion came . . .

The Railway Traveller's Handy Book

Ye may talk of Columbus's sailing
Across the Atlantic sea
But he never tried to go railing
From Ennis as far as Kilkee . . .

They find out where the engine's been hiding,
And it drags you to sweet Corofin;
Says the guard, " Back her down on the siding,
There's the goods from Kilrush comin' in."
Perhaps it comes in in two hours,
Perhaps it breaks down on the way;
" If it does," says the guard, " be the powers,
We're here for the rest of the day!"
And while you sit and curse your luck,
The train backs down into a truck!

" Are ye right there, Michael? are ye right?
Have ye got the parcel there for Missus White?
Oh, ye haven't! Oh, begorra!
Say it's comin' down tomorra
And it might now, Michael, so it might!"

PERCY FRENCH, *Are ye right there, Michael?*

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At nine in the morning there passed a church,
At ten there passed me the sea,
At twelve a town of smoke and smirch,
At two a forest of oak and birch,
And then, on a platform, she

A radiant stranger, who saw not me.
I said, " Get out to her do I dare? "
But I kept my seat in my search for a plea,
And the wheels moved on. O could it but be
That I had alighted there!

THOMAS HARDY, *Faintheart in a Railway Train*

Scene between shifters

I was left to my own shifts on landing; the greatest difficulty was in getting my trunk from among the hundred others . . . At last I said, " Stand out of the road, will you? there is the trunk before my eyes; and I will lift it away myself without troubling anyone! " Whereupon the clerk cried out in a rage, " For Godsake give that Lady her trunk and let us be rid of her."

JANE CARLYLE, *Letter to Thomas Carlyle*

Dr. Beeching . . . I presume!

I looked out of the train,
And I suddenly saw the empty station
As we hurtled through, with a hollow roar . . .
" Harviston End " . . . It was dark and dead;
Thick dandelions choking the flower-bed,
Torn posters that flapped on the porter's shed,
A broken window-pane,
The waiting-room's shuttered desolation,
The padlock on the booking-office door . . .

PETER LING, *Harviston End*

Elysian Fields

They are hard at it again. From Shoreditch to Yarmouth their whole line is a scene of that wild merriment and frantic adventure conventionally characteristic of a rover's cabin. Cambridge trains go to Hertford, and Hertford trains go off, and are never heard of again. We do predict with the utmost confidence that there will in a few years be a veritable county tradition of some lost Parliamentary train plying about Ely and Brandon, like the Flying Dutchman round the Cape, with phantom stokers and ghostly passengers . . . *The Times, Saturday 17 October* 1846

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BLACK WATER CREEK

He stepped quietly towards shore
into the sharpest terror of the night

BY ROBERT CRAIG

THE forest towered around him, greyed with the lacework of Spanish moss, and the creek lay among the trees like a twisted ribbon; a glistening ribbon the colour of strong tea.

His father, sitting directly behind him in the stern of the little dinghy, leaned forward until he could whisper in Jeff's ear.

"Look!" he said. "There! On the bank."

Looking where his father pointed, Jeff saw the curling movement of a deadly snake leaving the water.

"Water moccasin," his father told him as if he didn't know.

The snake disappeared among the cypress trees of the shoreline and Jeff's breath sucked in through his teeth with the natural excitement a boy has for everything in the woods. He was stirred by even the sight of the shafts of golden light the late sun javelined through the tree-pillared world. He was fascinated too by the butterflies that, like flying flowers, danced in and out of the purple shadows and the rich light.

His father had taught him how the vines and trees fought one another for sunlight, each trying slowly to strangle or suffocate the other. He knew too how the animals lived on each other's flesh and blood; frogs on insects, 'coons on frogs, alligators on 'coons. Yet it was only in this Florida wilderness where the massive silence was just nicked at by the song of a bird and the fussing of the dinghy's outboard motor, that he found escape from his own troubles, his own fears, and his own sense of failure.

"Jeff," his father said from right behind him, "watch that tree ahead. It's a fresh windfall. It's big. It could be dangerous."

Ahead of them a great maple had its roots undercut by the current and the wind had toppled it across the creek from bank to bank. Its main column had snagged high in tall ash on the far shore, but its still-leafy crown hung almost to the water.

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"I don't like the look of it," his father said, "but we can skim under it. Just don't touch it. Duck low."

The dinghy began moving under it and the tree, beautiful even in its dying, loomed above them.

"Watch your fly rod," Mr. Pitkin called sharply. "Get that tip inside the boat."

Jeff had forgotten his rod. He'd left it propped beside him; its tip, angling upward, was already tangling in the tree. If he broke the tip of his rod now! He yanked it backwards. The butt caught on the stern and as the dinghy pushed in under the tree the rod bent until he knew it was going to snap.

His father cut the motor dead, but it was too late. Right there the current wasn't strong enough to break the momentum of the boat fast enough, and Jeff began fighting the branches of the maple to save his rod. He felt the jarring blow against his wrist of a heavy branch that had been screened by leaves, and instinctively he grabbed at it to stop the boat. For a second he would always remember he was looking at the sky above the creek, and he saw it rolling in on him. And then he knew it wasn't the sky falling on him; it was the tree.

The heavy branch lunged at him viciously and he barely slid out from under it, passing it over his shoulder. His shout of warning was cut in half as the dinghy swamped and he was plunged deep under the dark water. His lungs, only half-full of air, sucked convulsively at his closed throat, and in his moment of utter fear he realised he was pinned to the muddy creek bottom by the many-fingered hand of the tree. On his back he could see the light of the day through the amber water. He struggled furiously but his feet weren't under him and he had no leverage.

There was an instant when he knew he was going to drown, but even in that tick of time he saw his father swimming deep beside him, pulling frantically at the pinioning branches. His father yanked and heaved for what seemed an endless time, although it couldn't have been more than seconds until Jeff felt the weight of the branch on his chest lighten. He wasn't out from under it by any means but he squirmed, mad with fear, and felt it tear his shirt and skin. The sense of floating was like being reborn. He rose; the water broke from his face, and all his life he would remember the sugar-sweet taste of that first breath of air.

He found his father floundering along beside him and he saw that already the current had carried them downstream of the tree. Ahead and to their left where a long-dead log tipped gently into the water, the bank seemed firm enough for a landing, and they struck out for it. The running water slewed them into the mossy edge where they lay on their stomachs in the shallows panting

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and staring at each other. His father's eyes were only a foot away from his own and his face seemed oddly pale.

"O.K. now?" he asked Jeff.

"Yeah. And you?"

"I've hurt my leg," his father said, his teeth making a grating noise. "I—I think—it must be broken."

This seemed immediately impossible to Jeff. His father had been always so stalwart, but the spreading whiteness round his father's mouth, the deepening lines of pain in his face, and the little moans of breath ended Jeff's disbelief.

"Take my hands," his father said. "Pull me all the way in."

Jeff stood up still dazed with surprise, and his father held up his hands to him like a child. Jeff took his father's hands in his own and pulled him through the water and as far up the land as he dared, as if he were beaching a boat.

"I can pull you to that sand mound," he said. "It's dry there."

"Let me try it myself."

The sand mound was only ten feet away and his father started pulling himself towards it with his arms and pushing with his right leg, his left leg trailing along strangely useless. Jeff helped him by lifting and pulling him gently by his belt, but he was appalled by the flopping, crippled body of his father. When his father had travelled the terrible ten feet and rolled over on his back to gasp, Jeff knelt beside him, and his tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

Of all the troubles he had caused—of all the wretched things he had done this was the worst, and he almost couldn't stand the accumulated mass of his anguish. Voices echoed in his mind. His mother shouting at him and crying, "That table has survived for over three hundred years and you have to snap the legs off it!" His sister: "I'll tell Mother you almost set the house on fire!" His maths teacher: "I'm giving you an A in carelessness, an F in algebra." His English teacher reading out the marks: "Jeffrey Pitkin, D minus." His principal: "If I catch you fighting in this school once more I'll expel you." Josephine Wilcox: "If you kiss me that way again I'll tell my mother." The city magistrate: "I'm releasing you into the custody of your father, but if you're ever caught driving even a motor scooter in this town before you're eighteen I'll remand you to the juvenile court."

And his father? "Make your bed." "Mow the lawn." "Stay away from Josephine Wilcox." "Get to work." "Calm down." "Grow up." "Think."

His father did something even more annoying to Jeff. He was constantly apologising for him as if Jeff were feeble-minded.

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"He hasn't any judgment yet." "He's growing too fast." "He's only fourteen." "He's at a clumsy age." "He has one foot in boyhood, the other in manhood, and he's stuck on the threshold." "Yes, dear, I'll talk to him again."

And those man-to-man talks! Jeff had thought he was going to be subjected to another one last night. His father, however, had just sat there on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes and drawing one long breath after another for what had seemed a long time.

"We'd better go fishing over the weekend," he'd said finally. "We could leave tomorrow after lunch. How about the St. Johns? We could leave the cruiser on the river, take the dinghy up some sidestream, fish for bass, get back aboard for some sleep, loaf Sunday morning, get home in the afternoon. How would you like that?"

That's all his father had said, and here they were miles up the Black Water and he'd broken his father's leg.

"I'm sorry, Dad." His voice trembled so badly he could hardly control it. "It was my fault. I can't do *anything* right."

"It wasn't your fault." The hand he reached out to Jeff squeezed his arm hard. "I saw how dangerous the tree was. I handled the boat poorly." He let go of Jeff's arm and lay there gasping, trying to gather his strength. "See if you can straighten my leg out," he asked finally, "but easy, boy, easy!"

Jeff saw that although his father had rolled his body on to his left side, his left leg hadn't turned over at all, and Jeff's stomach tightened. He didn't want to touch that leg, but it had to be done, and holding it by the shoe he turned it as slowly and gently as he could. His father's fists were so tight they turned white. He cried out only once, however, and then it was a muffled groan.

"That's better," he said at last. "Now scoop the sand round it and over it. I don't want it to move."

Jeff worked intently, covering his father's denim trouser leg with sand from foot to thigh, and when he finished his father seemed to rest a little more easily.

"Now take a look at the dinghy," he told Jeff, "and find the vacuum kit. It has hot coffee in it."

Jeff worked his way along the shore back to the fallen maple and found that it was entirely prone now, its heavy branches embedded in the creek bottom. Still weak with worry and dismay, he walked out along its thick body until he could see the dinghy. Its white inner decking was showing lemon-yellow through the dark water, and he could see that the ugly muscled branch—undoubtedly the one that had barely missed him and

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broken his father's leg—had speared through the hull just aft of the thwart on which he'd been sitting. In a dreadful imagining he saw himself still down there pinned on his back—drowned. He shuddered violently and looked round for the vacuum kit. He found it half floating alongside his broken rod and caught in the dead fingers of the maple.

It was only while his father was sipping his second cup of coffee that he looked any better at all.

"We're in a real jam," he said. "Do you know how bad it is?"

"How bad?"

"We didn't tell anybody where we were going. We didn't know ourselves. Nobody comes up this creek except crazy fishermen like us. It could be a long time before anybody came up this far."

"Somebody will see the cruiser."

"Remember we anchored it where it would be hard to see."

"But sooner or later somebody will see it."

"Yes, finally," his father admitted, "but there are lots of cruisers anchored in streams off the St. Johns. Even if they saw it, the chances are nobody'd think anything of it, unless they were looking for it." He took another sip of coffee. "My guess is," he went on, his voice a little more ragged with each word, "that your mother won't even get worried until Monday. If they start looking Monday, they might find us in a week."

They'd gone north on the St. Johns River to where the Wekiva flowed in from its forested land. They'd turned west into the Wekiva and followed its narrow, winding channel to its confluence with Black Water Creek. They had anchored the cruiser in the last deep water, and gone on up the twisting Black Water in the dinghy. The Wekiva and the Black Water made a long squiggly Y, and they were at the top of the right branch of that Y. Directly across from them—on the Wekiva—there was an isolated fishing camp on the top left branch of the Y. Jeff was thinking of that fishing camp, and it was as if his father could read his mind.

"It's four miles straight through the woods to that fishing camp on the Wekiva," he said.

"I could walk that," Jeff told him.

"Not that four miles." In spite of his weakness, his father's voice took on that old tone of command for a moment. "You could get lost in those four miles and *never* be found. Even if you could cut your way through it, even if you had a compass, there are swamps to get through and hummocks crawling with

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more and bigger rattlesnakes than you've ever seen. Don't try it."

The sun was beginning to set and the three-quarter moon was sliding up into the sky behind the lacework of trees.

"It can't be far back to the cruiser," Jeff said.

"It's six miles."

"If I just floated and followed the current I'd make it."

"No." His father's voice had dropped to a whisper. "Not tonight. We'll get through tonight somehow."

He seemed to nod, and closing his eyes he dropped off into what looked like sleep.

"Dad?"

There was no answer. The distorted shadows of the forest climbed in round Jeff and the great silence was accentuated by the hum of mosquitoes that were swarming awake with the setting of the sun. They bit his ankles, hands, neck, and face. They even slipped their tiny blood-sucking snouts through his shirt. There was no escape from them and he trembled under the insane touch of fear. To think at all he had to make himself breathe rhythmically.

It was the sudden but subtle torturing by the mosquitoes that interrupted his fear of the growing darkness and drove him to action. He zipped open the bulging side-pocket of the vacuum kit and took out the items one by one, realising for the first time the marvellous survival value of each one: a spoon, plastic container of salt, a snake-bite kit, the steel cylinder that held their dry matches, and the bottle of insect repellent three-quarters full.

Frantically twisting off the top of the bottle of repellent, he slopped the oily fluid into the palm of one hand and started to rub it over his face and neck, but he stopped. His father lay in front of him, helpless with shock. It was too dark now to see them, but he knew the mosquitoes must be already covering his father's body. He remembered that even with a broken leg his father had found the courage to rip him free from the river bottom, and starting at his one exposed ankle he began smearing him with the repellent. He unbuttoned his father's shirt and smeared his stomach and wide chest. He covered his arms, throat, and face. He even remembered to smear some on his father's thinning hair.

In spite of the dark, the loneliness, and his own tortured skin this service to his father gave him a sense of strength he had never before had. It had always been his father who had protected him, and now *he* was protecting his father. *He* had made this decision, and he knew it was the right one, but when he had finished there was no repellent left for himself.

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He had heard that mosquitoes could kill a man, and by the time he had made a fire of dried palm shards and dead logs he knew *how* they could do it; bite by bite . . . a thousand bites . . . ten thousand! He had made his first decision, however, and now he knew what his second would be.

"Dad!" he said, kneeling beside him.

For an answer his father made only a sound in his throat, but Jeff was desperate and he took his arm and shook him.

"Dad! Wake up! Coffee!"

His father came slowly awake. Jeff helped him to lean on one elbow.

"I'm going back to the cruiser," Jeff told him, helping him to sip the last cup of coffee. "Tonight."

"Yes," his father said slowly and thickly, "I guess you'll have to try it. Keep with the current. Never get out of it. Feel for it. Watch for it. Keep—keep your head. Don't let yourself panic." He took a deep breath to steady his shallow breathing. "When you get down to the Wekiva the river widens into a kind of lake. Remember?"

"Yes."

His father took another sip of coffee.

"It's deep," he went on, labouring over his words. "You'll have to swim for the cruiser. Swim hard . . . kick hard . . . splash . . . lots of noise."

"Why?"

"Just do it. Don't ask."

"Alligators?"

"They'll stay away," he said, admitting Jeff was right. "They don't like too much noise."

He wrestled his fingers into a pocket and took out a key.

"Ignition key for the cruiser," he said, giving it to Jeff. "Whatever you do, don't lose it."

The key was a talisman. It meant he had to go; it meant he had to make it, and with a suffocating sense of foreboding he put it in the tight watch-pocket of his blue jeans.

When he looked back at his father he saw him staring at the grease on his fingers. He rubbed a little more off his chest and studied it in the dancing red light of the fire.

"Repellent?" he asked. "What about you?"

"I'll be under water."

His father managed a tight smile.

"Thanks, Jeff," he said, and put out his hand. "It's going to be rough," he went on as Jeff took his hand. "It'll take guts—but you'll be all right if you don't panic."

Jeff wanted to take his father's hand briefly and let go of it,

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but he didn't. His father was what little security he had, and the river trip was ahead and he was frightened of it. It lay ahead of him in much the same way that his life did—demanding and ominous—and he wasn't ready for it. A night heron croaked in the darkness. The mosquitoes were biting every inch of his exposed skin. He had to go. He couldn't get away from that trip. He had to make it.

"You'll be all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Good luck, boy."

Jeff took his hand away from his father's, and knowing that this was the easiest part of his odyssey, he stood up and walked towards the water, trying to look unafraid and resolute. At the touch of water he lunged forward and the cold current embraced him and soothed his insect-bitten skin; but he was instantly engulfed in a swirling dark world that was silvered only on the top with moonlight.

Breast-stroking to keep his balance, he let the current carry him. He watched the tree-lined banks go by and judged that he was moving about as fast as a man walking. Six miles. Could he make it in two hours? As if for an answer the current slammed him into a jagged, submerged log. It hit him full in the stomach and he was jarred as if he'd walked into a wall. But the creek water didn't let it go at that. It threw him off balance, crowded him on over the log, gashing the soft skin of his side and ripping his shirt. It flipped him upside-down and washed him along relentlessly. He came up coughing, choking, and treading water.

"All right," he said when he could, "keep your hands in front of you. Dog paddle, stupid."

Within twenty feet he found out how right he was. His hands hit the next submerged log a split second before his body did and he managed to squirm round it with only a scrape on one leg. After that it was the sharp, broken stubs of old branches protruding from the logs that bothered him. They were like underwater knives waiting to tear at his skin and clothes.

Sometimes the creek was so shallow his bare feet raked through the ooze on the bottom, touching all kinds of dead, moss-covered debris from the forest. Sometimes the water pooled into holes so deep he could go completely under into its darkness without touching anything. It was his master and yet his only hope. It pummelled him, rolled him as if still trying to drown him, and yet it carried him and guided him through the otherwise pathless forest.

Once he found himself beached on a mid-stream sand bar. The width of the pool there and the lilting breeze kept the

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mosquitoes away and he lay down to rest, his body crying for sleep. He'd wait until sunrise and go on, but even as his eyes closed he thought of his father. He pushed himself to his feet, walked along the sand bar to its end and splashed back into the water.

And then there were the animals of night. He floated within a foot of an egret before it squawked like a startled witch and flapped away, turning into a silver kite on its way to the moon. At a bend in the creek where he missed the channel and stood up unexpectedly to look for it, the woods round him broke into a riot of noise—squeals, grunts, the pounding of running hoofs and the crash of bodies in the brush. The wild hogs startled him so that he could only stand there in the moonlight and try not to sob, until the mosquitoes drove him back into the water. He saw a doe and two fawns dance away among the trees as if they were ballerinas, and often he came too close to the clownish shapes of 'coon, 'possum and armadillo. And then there was the stuffy-looking bird with the recurved bill. If he hadn't seen it fly before it called, he might have collapsed with shock. It yelled like a man being throttled, its scream echoing through the naves of the forest.

He saw so many animals so close because he was floating in absolute silence with only his head above water. All along the wild river he surprised them at their hunting and drinking, and little by little he became accustomed to looking for them without fright.

It was the unseen and unknown things that lived and died in the black water around him that seemed far more threatening. Time and again he saw the silvered water ahead of him break and splash, and occasionally he saw the silhouette of a powerful back lift above the surface and glide back into the water around him.

Bruised and ripped as he was, Jeff was beginning to think he'd make it to the cruiser when he hit the log jam. There was a channel through it, but when he remembered where it was, it was too late. Completely water-soaked the logs were piled from the mucky bottom to within three inches of the surface, and they lay beneath him like criss-crossed fingers slippery with moss. When he went over the first one and banged into the second one, he found he could neither float nor crawl over them. When he tried to crawl, a knee would slip off and down he'd go between logs, his feet entangled in strange undergrowths.

On this third lunge his right leg wedged in among three or four logs and he fell over backwards, sure that he too would break his leg, but the bone held. He was on his back, however, held by one leg like a 'coon in a muskrat trap while the current

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flowed over him. Every time he tried to sit up he dammed the running water with his body and was pushed back, and every time he relaxed the water ran over his face and up his nose.

The bone, sinews, and skin of his leg were fired with pain, and his lungs were choked with water. Every time in his life he'd ever been in trouble there'd been someone—his father—to help. Even now, knowing what had happened to his father, he found himself expecting that he would appear and help him. Once he even managed to shout for help because the image of his father was in his mind. There was no answer, of course, and the image faded, and a voice within him said, " You're alone. There is no help."

The next time he came to a partially sitting position he grabbed the thigh of his trapped leg, and in spite of the extra agony he pulled himself still farther forward until he could reach up into the current far enough to grab another log. From there he pulled himself far enough forward to release his wedged leg. After that, what if the logs did tear at the sides of his stomach? He pulled himself across them, and by the time he slid off the last one into deep water he was so exhausted he could hardly swim to the shore although it was only ten yards away.

During his fight to make the shore he noticed that the creek was much wider and markedly warmer. Even the bottom was sandy to the touch of his feet. Clothed now in only the remnants of his jeans, he stood up quietly and stepped towards the shore and into the sharpest terror of the night.

The moon disappeared out of a clear sky and he was instantly imprisoned in a furious, flailing blackness. There were great wings of death beating him and stroking him, and he yelled in horror. He heard his own yell again and again, and as quickly as the moon had disappeared it reappeared and the wings were gone. He was utterly incapable of thought, but his eyes saw the great blue heron pounding off into the moonlight on its eight-foot wing span.

He fell back into the water, crawled to the bank, and lay down until his mind began to explain what had happened. The heron must have been gliding in for a landing to hunt in the shallow water. Coming in that way, edge-on in the moonlight, he wouldn't have seen it, and he'd stood up right in front of the gliding bird.

Finally the mosquitoes reminded him that he was alive, and he thought of where he was and of his father, and the need to care for his father rose uncontrollably. His own muscles and lungs were beyond weariness, but he crawled back into the water where the current was so slow he had to start swimming.

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He thought perhaps he had a mile to go, but at the next bend the channel broke sharp right and widened quite suddenly into an oval looking-glass of water and there was the cruiser. He scrambled once again for the shore and let the mosquitoes bite unheeded while he avidly studied the lake, iridescent under the moon.

The cruiser lay back on its anchor-rope, and a patch of mist on the water made it seem far away. From somewhere in the trees an owl to-hooed at him derisively, but nothing moved on the surface of the lake. He was not fooled by the exquisite sublimity of the night. The reptiles were there. He knew too that distance over water is easily misjudged, but he decided that it couldn't be more than three hundred feet away. Only a hundred yards to the end of fear. But could he make it? No. He couldn't. He had neither the strength nor the courage left. But he knew he was going to try to get to the cruiser whether he made it or not.

With sudden decision he sprinted down the narrow sandy beach, diving into the water with a stinging slap and a splash of silver.

Thrashing at the water with every stroke and kicking up a white plume behind him, he swam until his arms ached and his lungs hurt, and when he stopped the cruiser seemed as far away as it had before.

He looked behind and saw that the shore seemed to be almost as distant as the boat, and he turned towards the boat and went on again with his furious swimming.

The next time he looked ahead the anchor-rope was only a stroke away. With the nylon line in his hand he found that the deck was far too high above him and he clung to the rope, feeling like bait, and gasped. The propeller! Sloshing his way to the stern, he reached for the gunwale, stepped up on the propeller, and hauled himself aboard to fall on the decking of the cockpit like something wounded, but his hand was already groping in his watch-pocket for the key to the ignition.

When the engine was going and the anchor up, he turned the cruiser and headed down the Wekiva for the St. Johns River. He followed the drifting paths of the moonlight-tinted water hyacinths, and the wake of the cruiser boiled out to wash the shores with motor-made waves. He thought it would take half an hour to the St. Johns and maybe an hour to Sanford, but misfortune isn't a steady flow of trouble.

He rounded a sharp bend in the Wekiva, and as the moon seemed to move to one side there came the sound of shouted curses from the darkness of a cypress stand. The channel

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was wide, and he cut the engines and spun the cruiser back in its own wake.

" Who do you think you are? " a hoarse voice yelled at him. " Come ovah hea and I'll break yo damn neck! "

He could see them now, two fishermen in a small flat-bottomed boat that plunged and reared like a frightened horse in the cruiser's wash.

Jeff pulled the cruiser in beside them, completely unafraid, and sure of his ability to meet even an angry man.

" There's been an accident," he said, and the strength of his voice surprised him. " My father's up the Black Water with a broken leg."

" How far up is he? " the man asked, anger suddenly gone from his voice.

" About six miles."

The man turned to his companion.

" Make fast, son," he said, " and git aboard. We're going up the Black Water."

The fire he had left burning so brightly was only a glowing ember when he came back to it, and the moon was low in the west.

As the fishermen's boat skidded up the bank he jumped clear, ran to where his father lay so quietly, and dropped down beside him.

" Dad! I'm back. A Mr. Wilson and his son are here. We've got a boat to take you out."

His father opened his eyes, looked at Jeff for a long moment, and slowly reached out and put his hand on his shoulder.

" You're a good man, Jeff," he said quietly.

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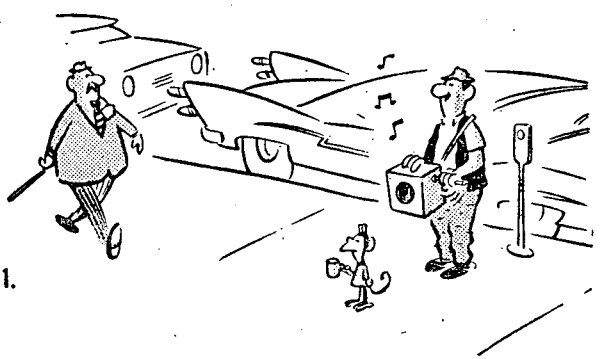

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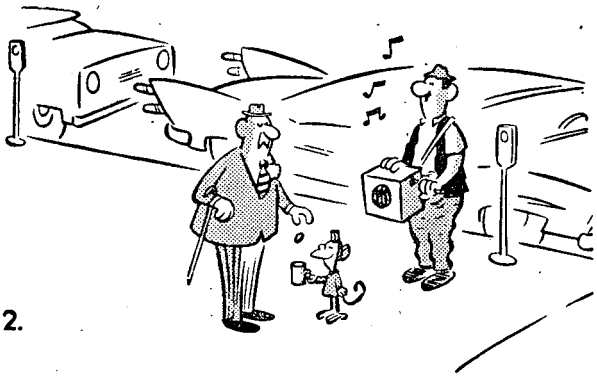

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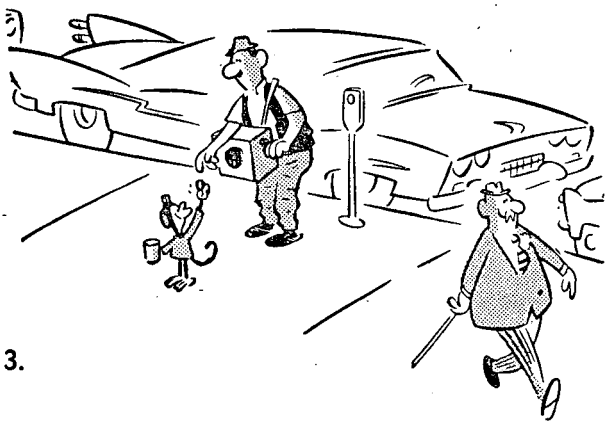

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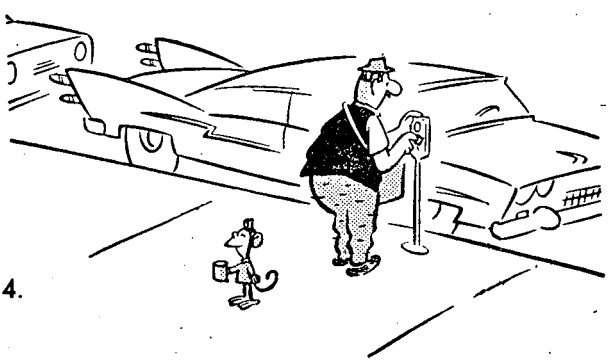

4.

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HAND OF TIME

by Meir Ronnen

GOOD MORNING and a Blessing, Rabbi. I had to speak with you. They wanted to send me to the doctor, but I preferred to speak with you. It is more fitting to the situation. And I am not mad. Not yet, Praise the Name. And did I not save the group? All except Amiram, that is. He got a bullet in his skull, first burst. That was why we had such troubles. Amiram had the radio, the vorki-tork.

I come to you because you are more than a soldier like the rest of us. We are young, even if we have spent two years now as soldiers. May it be that we soon receive our release! You are a major and wear the wings of the parachute. But you are first a man of the Blessed Name. To you I must tell my story . . .

There were eight of us, as you know, in two jeeps, the patrol from Beersheba to the Red Sea. As usual as an escort, this time for a bus of tourists, Amerikaim, who had flown down from Tel Aviv to see the corals and the copper mines. We were late a little and tourists must not be kept waiting; and it is very hot at this time in the desert, as is known to you. So we travelled fast and our hearts were not concerned with what might lie at the side of the road, which is the new road; or with what might lie on the other side of the hills.

To make it short—the Beduim opened fire and we were unprepared. The first jeep rose on a mine. A miracle . . . Only a wheel was lost, nothing more. But we should not have travelled so close together. It is written so in standing orders. Anyway, I have long said the jeep is good for a lift to Haifa, but in the desert it is useful like central heating. No protection. Nothing at all.

How the fear filled me! But the Yardenim must have been of a fear as great as mine, for see, they hit only Amiram, who was not quick to leave the jeep. It must have been that the vorki-tork was between his knees. They were not Legionnaires, or they might have had all of us at once. They must have been sons of the black tents, Beduim, perhaps cousins of those we caught stealing from the Beduim who pitch their goatskin tents with us.

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I took a flint and cut into the flat stone three lines denoting water

I would like to know where they got that mine.

Eliezer, he that is our section commander, did not lie down under the jeeps and wait for his end. He has a great head that one, even if he is a university student. They wanted to send him to the khorse for officers, but the fool wants to go back to university! Anyway, he ran like a gazelle in the direction from which there seemed the least shooting, letting off his gun all over the place. The rest of us followed him and did the same. With the help of The Name we entered a light depression which had not covered the road and into which the Beduim could not shoot for at least forty metres. We had been trained well. As Eliezer directed, we broke from the depression together, then spread out in a long line. Eliezer and Casa, the new one from Morocco who is a dream with the automatic, laid themselves down in the stones and gave covering fire.

The rest of us ran like camels across the stony plain, until we remembered Eliezer and Casa. Then we all gave fire until the pair caught up with us. Eliezer was lightly wounded in the neck and the Tel Avivi, Chaim, had a scratch on his arm. No one else, apart from poor Amiram, was hit. The Beduim don't know how to shoot unless they can take their time.

From there, we made retreat to the foothills on the edge of the Arava plain. Eliezer selected a hill and we went straight up it, a good hundred metres. On three sides it was very steep and there were a few rocks on top. A ridge like a horse's back ran off the fourth side, evidently connecting it with the wild range behind. It is of a certainty known to you what those hills are like. Hard, bare, eroded into fantastic teeth, hills of teeth known to us as the Mountains of the Moon.

It was the best we could do, but it was not good enough. The sons of the black tents know those hills, but few of us do. Of a certainty none who are numbered in our unit. We would be trapped there in the wadis which turn in and out and run back into each other, or which end in a blank wall and a hole in the ground where the flash floods of winter disappear, and where two or twenty men can be killed with ease from the heights above. Such a prospect did not appeal to us at all. We would stay on our hill and kill as many Beduim as strength would allow and perhaps help would come when we were missed.

The vorki-tork was no longer with us. On the road, in the

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distance, we could see the jeeps, and the figure slumped down in the first jeep, grasping the radio.

The Beduim tried to pick us off, but even as we fired back we could see that they were not running away, although some of them were heading back into Jordan, where the other line of hills came snaking down to the roadside where the jeeps stood, still smoking. It seemed to me also that over there were little eddies of smoke, or perhaps it was dust only, above the huddled figure in the jeep.

Then the sound of the firing came to us across the Arava plain. As the sons of Azazel went past the jeeps into Jordan they fired again into Amiram, and the dust of the bullets rose as they hit the plain. But that wasn't the worst of it any more. It was clear to us that they were going back to bring more help . . . Like a mortar. How long can you lie on a hilltop when they are mortaring you?

I don't blame Eliezer, he's a good boy, but it wasn't long before we realised that help was not coming, not in time that is.

When Eliezer saw that they were firing again at Amiram he went mad. Perhaps he was mad at himself also, I know not. He stood up against the skyline like a crazy one, shooting off his Uzi. When the magazine was empty he pulled "pomegranates" out of his vebbing, jerked the pins out with his teeth and threw them. We all fired like mad men. The Beduim stopped climbing after us and rolled shrieking down the hill, until they were away from the pomegranates. They swore horrible oaths and Eliezer, still standing up, continued to throw pomegranates and swear back. "Damn your mothers!" he cursed them in Arabic. We had to pull him down.

There was no more firing because we didn't show our heads. We lay there, in the sun, and the sun is terrible in the Arava. We lay there all afternoon, peering over the rocks. We were not looking down the hill, but over the road into Jordan, from where the mortars must come in the evening. Next day, next morning they might wonder in Eilat why we had not arrived and would send more jeeps. By then, perhaps just after the ascending of the sun over the saw-toothed hills, the mortars would be silent. Four, five rounds. That would be all.

After a time, it began to get dark. I raised my head and looked around at the hill. I couldn't see much, lying there among the rocks and keeping one eye for Beduim and the other for scorpions. I could see the saddle that led off the side of the hill, where we had posted Casa with the machine-gun. All the time it seemed to me that I knew this place, that at some time I had been there before. You know the feeling?

As I lifted my head higher all sorts of coloured lights danced

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in front of my eyes. It is very hot in the Arava and to lie out in the sun all afternoon is a sport known only to the Anglo-Saxim on the beach of Tel Aviv. I thought it was a headache, one of those sudden ones . . . I hadn't heard the shot, and I didn't know that a splinter of Negev rock had entered the side of my head.

When I came round, it was night, cold and clear and twinkling, as only the Negev can be at night. The north breeze that comes with the darkness lay cool and gentle on my throbbing head.

It was Eliezer who crept up to me and gave me water, from the goatskin. The skin had been torn by arrows in two places and the holes had been tied off with thongs. *No, Rabbi, let me tell it as it was, as it seemed to me. Afterwards you shall judge.*

It seemed quite in order that Eliezer spoke the Hebrew of the Book of Judges, carried the skin with the arrow holes and wore a ragged tunic of Sharon cloth. He gave me water and I accepted it, as easily as I acknowledged the cherev, the short sword that lay at my side. As the holes in the water-skin were tied off, it was obvious that there was some water in it, but not much.

Eliezer saw me staring at the skin. The moon was behind him, making a shadow of his face. I could not see farther to the others I knew were there.

"No, there is little water," said Eliezer, "there will not be enough for tomorrow. The other skins were by Amiram carried." He spoke quietly the stiff Hebrew of Judah.

"Amiram?" I asked, dimly remembering, "what happened to Amiram?"

"You remember not?" Eliezer replied. "He was the only one they hit at the track. The arrow took him in the eye. You remember not? Then we climbed this hill. It is good to fight from above. If you have water and food. They threw also stones, but not as hard as we can with the sling. But your big head was waiting. It was a small stone, Praise the Name. Remember?"

Yes, something I remembered. Amiram on the track, other arrows thudding into his body. Then that knock on the head and all those suns before my eyes. And something else. The place, the hill. As though I'd been there at some other time.

I heard the others taking counsel with Eliezer. There would be no more attacks this night. Not until morning. If they did not succeed then the sun would do the rest. We had to leave the hill after all.

When my head felt better I picked up the short sword and took a stabbing spear from Eliezer. Was I not the best scout? Eliezer looked at the moon. There was not much time. There was but

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one way out, across the saddle of the horse's back. I had to keep below the ridge, for see, the moon was behind me.

The ridge broke against the rocky slope of another saw-toothed hill full of great sharp stones and loose small stones. I kept to the stones of larger size, for they would not move from my feet.

To the crown of the hill I climbed, for the sides were too steep for descent, but, Praise the Living Spirit, also too steep for the ascent of the foe. On the other side, wonder of wonders, was a descent into a great wadi, with almost sheer walls formed by ages of winter floods. At the bottom, it is known, are smooth flat stones, polished by the water, where a man may walk and even take a camel. The only way into the wadi at this place was the descent from the height on which we lay. This was the way out!

We moved away as quietly as the Angel of Death. Before the ascent of the sun, we were far along the wadi to the north, away from Edom. The water-skin was empty. In the forenoon we walked along the side of the wadi, in the shadow of the wall. When the sun was in the middle of the heavens, we walked with our tongues hanging black and heavy in our mouths. It was the time of day when man seeks shade and shelter and walks not. That is if there is shelter and no fear that thirty blood-hungry desert jackals are on his heels. We walked in the sun and the water-skin was empty.

The round stones of the wadi baked our feet. Gehinnom it was, from both ends. When we stopped for the midday prayer we took off our tunics and skins and stood upon them, so hot were the stones of the wadi. It was not spoken, but each of us plainly asked, Who shall stand on his feet to say the prayer at the going down of the sun?

There was one named Yehoshua who fell during the afternoon. His eyes turned back into his head and he fell upon the hot stones of the wadi. There was no wood for a litter, no man who could carry him alone. We stood still, the stones of the wadi blistering our feet. Could we leave Yehoshua? Nothing, no one moved, nothing moved except two small black specks that circled round and round each other high, high up in the deep bright yellow heavens.

I could not look up any more, the light seemed to open the head between eyes and ears. I looked along the wadi, where it dropped away in front of us, into a corner formed by a turn in the wall. It was then I saw the stone . . .

Where a wadi turns or ends, there is, as is known, often an opening in the rock. Where the opening is all rock, or between rocks, the waters of the winter floods remain, in great pools,

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underground. The sons of the desert know these wells, and each tribe keeps the knowing to its own, for these waters are their very life. The cracks or openings in the ground are covered by them with great stones, which keep out sun and sand. But all in the desert know these stones. And although we are not gifted with the sight of the sons of the desert, even fools may see the difference between a rock laid upon the ground by the King of Kings, and a flat round stone placed by the hand of a son of Adam.

I left the fallen Yehoshua and limped to the stone. The others questioned and, not being answered, looked, and also saw. We did not run to the stone, for we could not run; and perhaps there would be no water. The stone was unmarked but moved easily, and beneath was a black hole. Eliezer dropped in a small stone and we heard the sound of water.

Tunics and skins we tied together and the goatskin lowered into the dark waters. While the others poured the water over their heads, it came to me that I must mark this place, perhaps for others who might be guided to it by the Sacred Name.

So it was that I took a flint and cut into the flat stone the three lines denoting water. Then I took the goatskin and poured the water over my head. It was so cold that it struck the face like the battle-hammer of the Philistim. My head was sore and singing from the hurt of the stone and the hurt of the water. I saw lights before my eyes, and I fell.

When I looked up again Eliezer was pouring water into my mouth and over my face. But it was not the goatskin he held. It was a mimiya, a regulation water-bottle. At that moment I wondered at myself that I should expect my section-commander to be holding a goatskin, but when Eliezer explained that I had been hit by a splinter of rock I thought it must be only the result of the hurt. *See you, Rabbi, I did not immediately recall what—what had happened.*

"Where are we?" I asked Eliezer. The moon behind him made a shadow of his face.

"On the hill." I could feel his smile. He looked around and up at the moon. "Soon the sun will come, and the mortars."

It was then that I told Eliezer. Not everything. I told him what at first was but half remembered, half felt. I was sure that I had been here before. Was I not the best scout in the company? We had to leave the hill before dawn. The only way off the hill the Beduim could not cover was the saddle ridge. I would go and see. I had but to keep out of the moon, the big silver Negev moon.

I took my Uzi and crawled out along the ridge past where Eliezer had posted Casa with the machine-gun. Next to Casa

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lay a man with the ammunition. I said to him " Shalom." " Shalom," he whispered back. His name was Yehoshua.

By the time I had reached the place where the ridge broke against the hill, I began to remember the . . . dream. I know not of which I was more afraid then . . . the dream, or the mortars!

I reached the summit of the height and below me, from north to south, lay the wadi.

You have heard the story, Rabbi. We left the hill as silently as the passing of autumn clouds; we came down into the wadi. Eliezer and the others started to turn south, to Eilat. It was then that they said I was mad. To go north!

I told them not what I thought I knew. I told them I did know, for otherwise they would not have come to the north. The water-bottles were in the jeeps, all but Eliezer's which was on his belt, and we could not walk to Eilat without water. More, I told them, the Beduim would surely think we would make for Eilat and if we were careful we could conceal the way we would walk, and not leave scratches upon the stones of the wadi. But water! I know this place, I told them. There was a waterhole, a well, less than a day's march. To the north. After that the planes would come and they would see us.

We hung our boots around our necks, and keeping to the stones we walked five kilometres northwards before putting on our boots again. We had to keep out of the sand and on the stones. But it was no use now, walking without boots, for the blood marked the rocks more than boots. The blood caked in our boots when we put them on and by the time we stopped at midday . . . there were a few of us, Rabbi, who wanted to say the midday prayer . . . the others were feeling not good. And I—was afraid. I had looked since mid-morning for the flat stone that covered the well, the well that I had dreamed about. The wadi was not a dream; but the well . . .

Had I dreamed about the well? Had it ever existed? If there was a well, ever, at any time, would there now be water there? I had persuaded Eliezer to bring the section to the north. Why? To die at the end of the wadi?

After the prayer we staggered on. There was no place to sit down. The tongues of the others were too thick in their throats to curse. Then I heard one of them fall.

Eliezer said, " It is Yehoshua."

The others stood still for they knew not what to do. But I looked for the stone. I walked on down the sloping wadi floor and left the others standing round Yehoshua.

It was another half a kilometre. I did not dare approach it alone. They found me crawling back along the hot flat stones.

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They helped me back to the stone. It was marked with three straight lines.

Eliezer pushed it aside and there was water, and we laughed and cried and we waited in that place until the plane flew in the heavens and dropped manna on a small red parachute and showed us the direction to the road.

That is nearly all, Rabbi, but not the end. Was it a dream? Only know this, Rabbi. Only in the dream did I go to the stone. Later, in the wadi, the second time if you like, I did not go near it, nor did I touch it. That is what is worrying me. The marks on the stone.

They were there, the three straight lines cut deep into the rock; they were there as surely as the rock itself, which I remembered as surely as the wadi itself. That is what is worrying me, Rabbi.

The marks were clean, new, white inside the wound of the yellowed surface of the stone, the white powder still undisturbed by the morning stillness.

As though they had been made only the night before.

That is what is worrying me, Rabbi, and that is why I have come to you.

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SOLUTION TO THE CASE OF THE HOUSEBREAKER IN DECEMBER ARGOSY

Detective Inspector Bassett saw that the last two lines of the code were both short—so he deduced that they were related.

He knew Riley's friend was a Scot called McDonald—and the last four *related* letters spelt JOCK when read *up*, *down*, *up*, *down*. This told him that the message was not contained in single lines, but in *double* lines, and thus read:—

CORNER HOUSE GRAND AVENUE CONTAINS WEDDING PRESENTS HOUSE EMPTY BRING VAN NINE O'CLOCK JOCK

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 136

Across. 1, *Stingy*. 3, *Snowdrop*. 8, *Elflocks*. 10, *Barège*. 12, *Gripped*. 13, *Ochre*. 14, *Tenors*. 15, *Overheat*. 18, *Festival*. 20, *Carpet*. 24, *Peace*. 25, *Misrule*. 26, *Ulster*. 27, *Turandot*. 28, *Everyman*. 29, *Sneeze*.

Down. 1, *Sleight*. 2, *Grouper*. 4, *Weather*. 5, *Reeve*. 6, *Present*. 7, *Skids*. 9, *Friends*. 11, *Solve*. 16, *Expound*. 17, *Caper*. 18, *Failure*. 19, *Imagery*. 21, *Abstain*. 22. *Theatre*. 23. *Amour*. 24, *Posse*.

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THE

Argosy's new thriller by

William Haggard

Author of Venetian Blind, The Arena, The Telemann Touch, The High Wire

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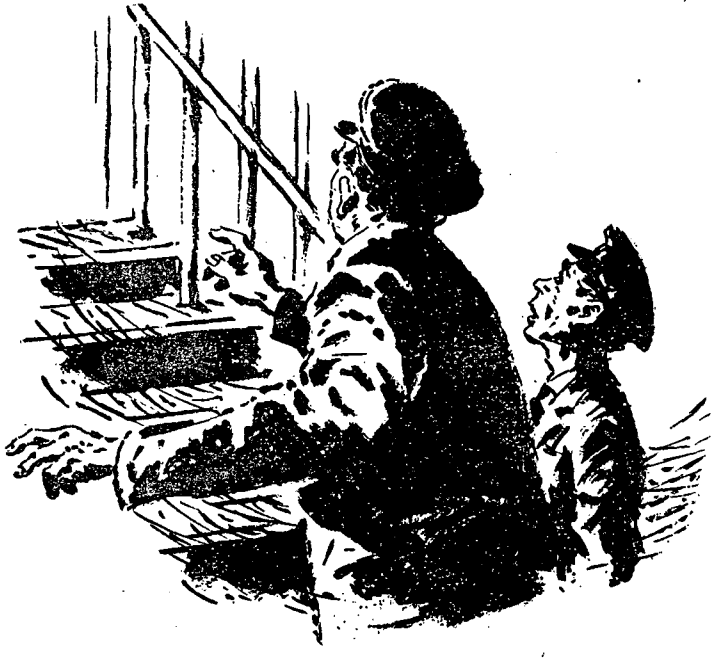
ANTAGONISTS

Charles Russell, head of the Security Executive, continues his investigations . . .

CHARLES RUSSELL, head of the Security Executive, had had his usual eight hours' untroubled sleep, and with that behind him he was facing a decision next morning.

Russell didn't quite credit that Mellion Lee, U.S. Scientific Counsellor at the London embassy, had sent his mistress, Margaret Palfrey, to Gorjan, the distinguished scientist from the Confederate Republic, with express instructions to seduce him . . .

In any case Mellion Lee's motives were much less interesting than the results of his action. The next move might come in days



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not weeks. Charles Russell frowned. These damned dilettanti, embassy amateurs, rushing their assignments . . .

It was time he talked to somebody who spoke the same language he did. There was a transatlantic Intelligence Agency of matchless resources and competence and Russell and its London head could talk as established equals. This was a time to do so.

He sent for a taxi, not his car, directing it to a house in Park Crescent, climbing out briskly, paying the driver from the silver he always carried. On the pavement he looked around him.

Russell walked along the Crescent, quietly admiring it. He had just been down to the Hemmingway Hospital, where Gorjan was still a patient. After that architectural barbarity there was an inescapable word for Park Crescent . . . it was civilised.

He walked through a door up a flight of stairs which pleased him. On the landing were other doors, and on one of them a bright brass plate—*The Milton Export and Import Company*. Russell pushed the door open and in a second had crossed the Atlantic. The room he now stood in was decently warm, and if anyone drank tea there they had put away the cups. There were two clerks at businesslike desks, a receptionist and, in a corner behind another desk, a sharp-eyed young man in a suit which wasn't English. There was an air of brisk prosperity which Russell approved. This was " a front " and he happened to know it. But nobody else would. The Milton was a genuine business genuinely paying its way.

He took out a visiting card, giving it to the receptionist. " I'd like to see Mr. Scobell, please."

" Have you an appointment, sir? "

" No, but I hope he'll see me."

" I'm afraid he's in conference. If I could ring you . . ."

The sharp-eyed young man had risen and crossed the room. He looked at Russell's card and then at Russell; he bowed politely. " Colonel Russell? I've always wanted to meet you." He inspected Russell levelly and without impertinence, then said surprisingly, almost to himself, " A legend walking in on us." His manner changed again abruptly. " If you'd please come with me, sir." He led the way to another door and opened it. As Russell walked past he announced him formally. " Colonel Charles Russell of the Security Executive." He went away.

A man behind a large clear desk had already risen. Russell had told his Minister, Gabriel Pallisey, that he liked his Americans American and this one was authentic. His hair was black, untouched by grey, though he was almost as old as Russell, and there was a hint of powder round a considerable but well-shaved jowl. James Scobell was as different from Mellion Lee as two men of the same race could be. Where Lee was thin and English-elegant, Scobell looked like the tackle he once had been. Where Lee talked Boston with overtones of an Oxford that never was, Scobell had a fine western whine which it had never occurred to him to mitigate. His vocabulary, yes: on his last trip home they'd laughed at him. But never the whinny. He said in it now, " Will you have a cigar? "

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" One of yours—certainly."

Russell lit the cigar with ritual care. Scobell was already smoking. He said through a reflective cloud, " It must be important to bring you here. Yourself, I mean."

" Yes, I trust my own telephone and I've guaranteed yours." Russell made a sitting bow. " Courtesy of the profession. But I wanted to talk personally—frankly, to watch you as well as listen. I don't quite know how you'll be taking this."

" We've always played ball when our employers allowed us."

" And sometimes when they didn't? "

James Scobell said deliberately, " I hear the words."

" That's good enough to start with." Russell blew smoke at the handsome ceiling. " Then you'll have heard of Alexander Gorjan, the scientist from the Confederate Republic."

" Who's in this country now—who came over to give the Andover Lecture—and who threw a bottle at old William Merridew for interrupting, and got him? Who then had a nervous breakdown and was taken to the Hemmingway Hospital?"

" Where the night he arrived two agents tried to murder him."

" Is that so? " Scobell sounded interested but he didn't look surprised. " And I understand there's also some question as to the whereabouts of the Republic's First Secretary, Stevan Starc."

" Did you know Gorjan was *sent* here—deliberately removed from the Confederate Republic by his own authorities? "

" No, I didn't know that, but now you tell me I believe you. We know how hot things are out there, and Gorjan's a party man. The *existing* party. He's also the biggest radar man alive." Scobell shrugged his tackle's shoulders. " And so—"

" So they send him to England where," Russell spoke sharply, "he damned near gets murdered."

" But doesn't. Of course that was thanks to you. Fraternal congratulations." Scobell grinned amiably. " You see I've picked up a little English in my time here. I've also picked up a great respect for a Colonel Charles Russell. So where do *I* come in? If you mean me to, that is. If I'm not jumping you."

" No." Russell looked at his cigar, apparently intent on it. " Do you know Mellion Lee? " He was looking at Scobell now, not his ash.

James Scobell was expressionless but he was thinking. He said at length, " Put another card down, please. Just one. I'll play with you when I've seen it."

" Mellion Lee seems inexplicably interested in Alexander Gorjan."

" Inexplicably? I don't think so." James Scobell shook his head. " We're a peculiar people—I've learnt that since I've been here. We like to think of ourselves as great inventors but in practice we're not. What we are is great improvers, great developers. Better mousetraps, you know, not the mousetrap originally. And we hate to see resources wasted. Gorjan is a major radar man, and for one reason or another he's now this side of the Iron

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Curtain. Your side to be accurate, but I reckon I know how your minds work. You wouldn't move to exploit him yourselves. You'd see all the difficulties and I'm not denying them. There would be political complications you couldn't see the end of and the sheer human decencies of not hunting a sick man. We'd see those too, but they wouldn't be decisive. To any good American, Gorjan would be temptation."

"I'd got as far as that myself but it's not the whole story. Here's Mellion Lee, a Counsellor of Embassy, contacting Gorjan. Why Mellion Lee?" Russell leaned forward. "Now if it had been yourself—"

"I can't answer that one."

No, Russell thought, he couldn't. Nor did he need to. The Milton Export and Import Company hid the operations branch in London of one of the most powerful Intelligence organisations in the world. Russell blessed his God that it existed, but in the past few months it had run into a streak of mostly undeserved bad luck, and in Security, Intelligence if you preferred it, it was the last result which counted. You could spirit away the heads of your enemy's bureaux, acquiring from what they told you more than your own agents could discover in a lifetime; you could dig a sensational tunnel, tapping a hostile communications system for months and years on end; and all this would count for nothing when you really dropped a big one.

Besides, there had to be a scapegoat for there were new men now in power. Russell wouldn't mention that. Scobell was a good Republican, a man of few words and brief ones. What mattered at the moment was that he was a professional who'd been by-passed: a job he should have handled had been given to an embassy amateur. Russell thought it stupid but the fact remained. The reasons too, and he knew them to be bad ones. Politics and Intelligence did not mix. Above all things mistrust was fatal.

Well, they'd learn from their mistakes in time but this one would be in England. That was why Russell had called at the Milton.

On a note of inquiry Russell said again, "Mr. Mellion Lee . . ."

"You probably know his background already, but I'll recite. He started as a mathematician—I mean he took an excellent degree in mathematics. I gather he meant to stay on and teach but he never did. The war came along, the Navy turned him down for the typically Navy reason that he was only slightly colour blind, and I suspect that before he really knew what hit him the State Department had made its grab. And there he's stayed. He's been successful enough but I doubt if he's a happy man."

"Whatever he is he's worked himself in on this one. So it's going to be the embassy amateurs."

Scobell smiled wryly. "Is that what you call them? We've a rougher word here. How's it gone so far?"

"You'll know about Lee's father's newspapers. Gorjan gave an interview to one of them last night. Mellion Lee must have fixed it since every other paper has been refused."

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" Very slick lead-in." Scobell nodded approvingly. " Who did they send to do the interviewing? "

" A Mrs. Margaret Palfrey."

" Hell."

" You know Mrs. Palfrey? "

" Sure I know her. She's an addlepate Leftie and she's Mellion Lee's mistress. She's also something else you'll have a word for—not mine perhaps but it means the same. Just how far Left she is, I doubt if Lee knows. But *I* do." James Scobell was relaxed but with the unmistakable authority of long experience. " That's the rod I keep in pickle, friend, and how it would pickle the diplomats! Counsellor of Embassy living with fellow-travelling nymph . . . They'd do most things to muffle that one. I don't know Lee well enough to wish him ill, but I need something like that just in case the embassy starts getting in our hair. At the moment I don't grade Lee higher than a striped pants under orders, but in this game you never know."

" You're remarkably far-sighted." Russell spoke admiringly.

" I pick up what's offered me."

" Cutting me in? "

" Whenever I can," Scobell shrugged. " And you've spared me the awkward questions. Shoot."

" Then how do you see it developing? "

" Messy and maybe dangerous—for all of us pros. Lee stinks of money and there's what he calls a cottage for weekends. That's a ready-made set-up so he'll probably try to use it. And why not? If Lee has strings enough to fix an exclusive interview, he'll also have the pull to get approval for a visit. So if the doctors at the Hemmingway will stand for it, he will try to get Gorjan to stay with him. Mrs. Palfrey as go-between, maybe as bait." James Scobell smiled but not with amusement. " Convalescence, they'll call it."

" And in fact? " Russell asked.

" I can only guess at what they'll try, but whatever it is it won't succeed. Probably they'll try bribery—no, not money directly. They're not that stupid. They'll talk about the American way of life, show him pictures of plushy houses, hunting trips in the mountains. All the kingdoms of the world and he won't give a damn. He's a commie and a good one, but his first loyalty is to his country, the Confederate Republic. The one thing that might tempt him, they simply won't think of. Do you know what that is? " Charles Russell shook his head.

" The best laboratory in the world. An unlimited budget quite without strings. Work on anything he fancies. He's a top-grade scientist and I know my scientists."

" You seem to. And when they've fallen down on the American way of life? " Russell said.

" They'll work on him all right, but it's guessing how . . ."

" Gorjan's still sicker than he seems. Suppose he takes it badly, has another breakdown and—"

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" It's your country, Colonel, your worry."

Russell said reflectively, " I'd like a man of my own in that cottage."

" As it happens, so should I, though for rather different reasons. I can't work against my own embassy, or at any rate not until we're forced to pick their bits up. We haven't quite got to that yet, so I'm obliged to play it carefully. Just the same I'd like to minimise the mess, and I've been thinking how to do it. A good reliable man in that cottage was as far as I'd got around to."

" If you'd rather have your own good man—"

" No, I'd rather have yours," James Scobell said. " We've an interest in common so I'll make you a proposition."

" Make it a good one."

" The best. We've done some spadework, and this so-called cottage is a long way from a town. It's difficult to get help there and they badly need a handyman. I had just the one to plant on them but instead I'll plant yours. If we need to, that is—if Gorjan does go down there. Your side of the bargain will be to pass me what this ear-man tells you. He'll be working for you, but you'll share the news with me. The news and no more, for I don't mean to blunder in. O.K.? "

" I'm very much obliged to you." Russell hadn't hesitated.

" You're welcome." Scobell rose with Russell and shook hands.

As Russell went through the door he said, " Good luck to us."

" I've a hunch we're going to need it."

The two white-coated men were sitting in the senior's room at the Hemmingway Hospital. The man behind the desk was a physician and perhaps a little conscious that the other was not. The psychiatrist was ineluctably a mid-European. In his throaty rasp he was saying pontifically, " In my considered opinion—"

" Yes? " The doctor's cool Scots voice was polite but deadly.

The psychiatrist swallowed noisily, changing in an instant to what was almost obsequiousness. " A few days in the country would do Gorjan good. Mr. Lee has been kind enough to make that possible."

" Then you know Mr. Lee? It was you he approached."

" I know him slightly, yes. I'm interested in the arts, you see, and there's a place we both belong to . . ."

" In the arts, yes, of course." It didn't sound a dirty word, only one suspect to practical men.

" And my brother has a gallery where Mr. Lee sometimes buys." The psychiatrist was pleased with that: that at least was business.

" I see. And the proposal now is that Gorjan should visit Lee for a long weekend? "

The other nodded and the physician was silent. The invitation struck him as unusual but not so unusual that it was easy to object to it. Mellion Lee's father was a newspaper tycoon and, presumably using diplomatic strings, it had been arranged that the

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eminent patient should give an exclusive interview to one of his newspapers. It had probably been some shameless fix but that wasn't a doctor's concern. So up comes a woman to the Hemmingway and the interview had been a long one. The doctor knew that since its length had begun to worry him; he had almost gone to Gorjan's room, but he was a Scot and shy, and he hadn't been able to think of an excuse which sounded reasonable. But he had seen the woman leave.

She had been walking very lightly, bright as a sparrow, and when she had gone he had visited his patient. Gorjan had been quieter than usual, looking a little fatigued. The doctor knew nothing about the world of newspapers but was determined that nothing should surprise him. If that was the technique for very exclusive interviews . . .

Then back comes the woman next day with Mellion Lee, introducing him boldly and with a reasonable story. His father had been so impressed with the interview, so impressed with the man who could give it, that he felt his son must meet him. If the doctor would agree, of course. They had both been entirely correct and it had been equally difficult to refuse them. One exclusive interview had already been allowed and a second wasn't easy to distinguish. Gorjan wasn't ill, or not in the sense that a visit would upset him, but he could have another attack tomorrow, in which case he'd probably die. That was the risk but it was wholly unpredictable.

A few days in the country might indeed do Gorjan good. He'd been asking about it himself and patients weren't always wrong. Gorjan had suggested Cambridge but this would be quieter. This looked all right and it probably was.

An instinct said insistently it wasn't.

The doctor returned to the psychiatrist across his desk. He took from a drawer the chart of an encephalogram, passing it to the other. "What do you make of that?"

"The human brain . . . I've a limited faith in machinery when applied to it."

"No doubt." The physician was succinct but still polite.

"But I don't deny facts. Gorjan is still disturbed."

"We've that much in common then. My own opinion, for what it's worth, is that if he were anyone else but who he is it would be our duty to call a surgeon. There's pressure—I'm convinced of it."

The psychiatrist said contemptuously, "A butcher." He was arrogant again and the doctor detested him.

"The word in this room is surgeon. Not that it's important since they'd never let us operate."

"Then all that is left us is civilised treatment. Relaxation in the country would be part of it."

"Perhaps."

"Do you forbid it?" The psychiatrist hadn't intended it but the sentence came out as a snarl.

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The physician rose stiffly. He walked to the open window. He knew that the interview with Gorjan had been arranged through his ambassador, for an Excellency had telephoned himself. So the ambassador must have approved this invitation too. If some doctor impeded it, they'd start making it pretty hot for him . . He said sadly, " I don't much like it but—"

" But what? "

" Oh, take him away . . ."

" *Oh, take him away* " were the only words not quite clear on the tape which Charles Russell was playing back two hours later. But they were clear enough. Copeman, his man at the Hemmingway, had been busy and effectively, and the doctor would have had to be very experienced to find the microphone even if he had known that one was hidden. Russell reversed the recorder, playing the tape a second time before he left the office for his club . . .

Russell was drinking sherry in his club when Normer of Nowhere came up to him. That wasn't his style and title but it had stuck. He was a top-class scientist who had properly been ennobled for outstanding work on radar, but he hadn't fancied a territorial title derived from territory he had never held. So, since he had been born there, he had suggested Lord Tooting Bec. This hadn't gone down well.

He walked up to Russell openly, holding a quart of beer. He had a beer-drinker's stomach but was happily resigned to it. Across the silver tankard Normer said easily, " Let's go into the library."

Russell followed him at once. He looked round the splendid room, seeing that it was empty. When they were settled Normer asked bluntly, " Tell me why Gorjan's here."

" He came for the Andover Lecture."

" Tchah!" Lord Normer took a swig of beer. " I don't quite believe you but I can guess at your inhibitions. It's not important. I'm not telling you that he and he alone knows the secret of some schoolboy's ray; I'm saying that in the world of microwaves —what you mostly call radar—he's ahead of the rest of us. I believe Gorjan's near to something big. It might be almost anything—the field is enormous."

" You wouldn't care to cut it down? "

" I'll *guess* it down—remember that." Normer stared at his empty quart and Russell rang for a waiter. While the beer was arriving Normer went on reflectively, " People tend to think of missiles as things which go up and down—motor at one end, warhead the other, and some sort of homing system sandwiched in the middle. But it doesn't work out as simply, especially with the big ones. Guidance systems were always pretty complicated and interference has made them more so. I know of four proven methods of upsetting a missile's targeting, but so does everybody else. So they build four anti-interference systems into what's already a considerable mass of electronic gear. It's already a serious problem. You can't cut the fuel for a given range, and cutting

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the warhead is self-defeating. But the bit between motor and warhead gets steadily more complicated, so, given your limitations, the missile itself gets bigger and bigger. The Big Boys, the Inter-Continentals, are pretty well near the limit now."

"So that a fifth means of *interference*, a really new one—"

"It would be countered of course—in time. Somebody would untangle it, and another enormously sophisticated piece of electronics would be built into your rocket. If, as I say, the thing could still be done and make it fly. But that apart, there's the question of time. So far this interference has been more or less move and counter-move. And counter-counter-move. We've known something about Alpha, so Alpha-Beta hasn't caught us entirely napping and we've developed Alpha-Gamma fairly quickly. So back we are at Alpha again. But something, as you call it, really *new*—"

Russell said slowly, "What would it mean?"

"Militarily? The balance of terror? It would depend who you were."

"Go on."

"Suppose you had to fire them first. Suppose that even ten per cent fell harmlessly in the Arctic. I know that doesn't sound a lot, but remember that your first targets won't be cities but the means of retaliation. It won't perhaps deter you that your enemy suffers less, but there'll also be certain knowledge that your own side will suffer more. That's what bridge players call a swing, you know—you count it both ways."

Russell was silent, for he'd heard this before. That had been from Palliser, but Gabriel Palliser, his Minister, wasn't a scientist. He asked at length, "And that's your guess?"

"It isn't melodramatic and it doesn't offend what's known. You could call it an informed guess."

"Which Gorjan holds the answer to, or very soon may?"

"I think so—yes."

"Then coming from where he comes from—would you like to be Gorjan?"

"That's what I came to tell you . . . *No.*"

So it wasn't Gorjan's body they would want now, it was Alexander Gorjan alive. The hounds were at his heels again and Russell resented the trespass. They wanted the scientist's mind, his will; they wanted the power to use him.

Gorjan had been very ill, and moreover he was a guest here. So, for that matter, was Mellion Lee, shamelessly abusing a mild host's house. Russell cursed quietly, suppressing a mounting anger. Back in his flat, he telephoned to Scobell, dialling a number which wasn't in the directory under The Milton Export and Import Company . . . Yes, exactly as you forecast. Mellion Lee had followed up the interview and Gorjan was to stay with him for a long weekend. The ambassador, Mitrovic, must have agreed on behalf of the Confederate Republic—why was an open guess—but at least it served his original purpose which was to keep Gorjan in

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England. So this man of mine, this man of *ours* . . . Yes, right away. Name, Oliver Copeman and wholly competent. Tonight? To Scobell's house? Understood and agreed.

DETECTIVE Inspector Mellor had left the London embassy of the Confederate Republic with a suspicion he detested: he was a policeman being asked to make the motions. And his interview with his Superintendent had been far from reassuring. His Superintendent hadn't limited him but he had pointed out that Stevan Starc was a diplomatist; he had pointed out too that four days had elapsed and it was at least a fair assumption that the missing diplomat, Stevan Starc, had quietly skipped the country.

Mellor had hated it. He had a backlog of work and not enough men to cover it. Either they really wanted Starc, in which case they could say so and he'd do his best; or else they didn't, when he could call off his hard-worked men. The case put his professional back up. He obstinately decided to bring in Starc, the missing First Secretary of the Confederate Republic.

Mellor hadn't any call to be pounding the pavements west of Finsbury Park station in very plain clothes and his private time, but he had arrived in the sleazy jungle of N.4 by a process of reasoning which Russell would have approved.

Detective Inspector Mellor would have admitted that there had been a good deal of guesswork, but there had been a solid core of logic too. He had been liaising with the Security Executive and, since Starc was a diplomat, he could understand that it seemed well content that Starc should be sought (if he must be sought) as simply a missing person. But there had been a contact with a barmaid too, and Starc had been representing himself as some sort of petty thief. The Executive was handling that side, and Mellor had been too experienced to meddle. But it had made him think.

A certain economy was an essential of successful lying, which meant in practice that you told the simplest lie. And the simplest lie about what you were was one which told *a part-truth*. Why say you were a thief if you didn't even know any? Why not play it big and hint at drugs? Clearly, the barmaid at Starc's local pub hadn't been scrupulous. And Petar, the embassy servant, had been beaten up and robbed in his encounter with . . . Starc? But if you did know a thief, if a thief had put you in mind of thieving, it was possible you'd hole up with just that thief.

That was surmise of course, a very thin thread for the academically minded, but this was life and it was the only line Mellor had. Moreover it narrowed the field. London was full of thieves but most of them were English. Starc was a foreigner, an educated man; he wouldn't expect an English thief to credit for long he was really another. Nor would he go to a foreigner, one of his own race especially. But a man who spoke English but wasn't, a man he could impress as something special . . .

Mellor had decided that it might be a West Indian, but he was too cautious to be hopeful. He couldn't have sent a subordinate

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on what most of his mind insisted was a goosechase: instead he had come in person.

He had taken the tube to Finsbury Park station and had started to walk westwards. He hadn't a map but he was good at streets, and he had just calculated that he wasn't more than a quarter of a mile from his starting point. He looked around him, profoundly depressed. Three men out of five were black, and all the women. Mellor didn't object to that, since he wasn't colour-conscious. What depressed him was the street. It hadn't been painted in thirty years. There was rubbish in the gutters and a faintly acrid smell. There were junk shops and cafés, bursting dustbins on the pavements outside them.

He shivered in the gathering dusk and walked into a café, ordering tea for safety though he detested it, inspecting the cup suspiciously.

At the table on one side of him two men were talking in a language he recognised as Polish, and on the other were two West Indians. Across the room was an Indian alone, rather north, Mellor thought, of his countrymen's major beat. He wished the Poles good evening and they politely returned it. He smiled at the West Indians and, after a second's hesitation, they smiled back shyly. They were unshaven and tieless but, by their own magic, clean. Mellor had often noticed it. West Indians weren't fastidious but somehow were always clean: Indians bathed daily, literally religiously, but were people to keep up-wind of.

He began to watch the Indian. He was wolfing his food furiously, sausages and the inescapable mashed potatoes. Mellor thought it odd. The Indian had the fine features of the high caste Hindu. In which case he wouldn't be eating sausages. Or if he were a Mussulman he wouldn't be eating pork. If the sausages were pork. Which reduced it to a Mussulman guzzling beef and liking it. Except that he hadn't the air.

The Indian paid his bill and the two Poles rose with him. They walked to the door and the Indian went out first. The door shut behind him. There was a cry and the unmistakable thump of a heavy calibre pistol . . .

Stevan Starc's host had a job on British Railways; he was the inside man for an experienced gang which looted railway warehouses with contemptuous efficiency. He had accepted Starc for exactly what Starc had said he was, a jewellery-man operating in a very different world but needing, from time to time, the sort of hideaway the police wouldn't promptly look for. He admired Stevan Starc and his money was generous. The risk wasn't great. It hadn't surprised him when Starc had stained his face brown, for he had explained it convincingly. Starc wasn't trying to pass as an Indian, not amongst other Indians, but he was on to something where, for a vital ten minutes, Europeans must think he was one.

It was a very good hideout but had one serious disadvantage. Starc was near starving. He had the delicate stomach of the

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highly-strung man and the cooking defeated him. For a day he had been quite ill. Later there had been milk and bread, but he couldn't live for long on milk and bread. That evening he had been famished. He had hesitated, finally succumbed. He checked the stain on his face and hands. His hair was black naturally. Then he went in search of steak.

As it happened he didn't find it, settling instead for sausages. He was ravenous and was eating fast but more than hunger goaded him. He had heard men speaking Polish and for a second his scalp had crawled. He told himself it meant nothing, every language of Europe could be heard within a mile of him, but Poles . . .

He paid his bill and the Poles rose with him. They walked to the door and he went out first. The door shut behind him. One Pole drew a cosh but Starc threw an arm up. As he fell the other fired . . .

Detective Inspector Mellor was through the door in four long strides. One of the Poles and the Indian were struggling on the ground, the second Pole standing over them. He had a gun in his hand and he was trying to get a second shot in. The Indian was fighting desperately, struggling to keep the Pole on top of him. For an instant the other saw a half chance. The gun came up and Mellor kicked it. It spun in a parabola, sliding across the street, banging against the opposite kerb. Inspector Mellor waited. He still knew enough to kick a gun up but he was much too old to mix it. The street was deserted.

He said in a small clear voice, " I'm a police officer."

The second Pole rose and for a long count of ten both of them stared at him. Finally the second spoke. The language wasn't Polish now. The other shrugged and both men turned. They began to run clumsily, heavy boots thudding. They swung to the left; were gone.

Mellor turned back to the Indian. He was holding his stomach and fighting for breath. " Are you wounded? "

" He missed."

Mellor put his hand out and the Indian took it in his left. His shirt had been torn and for a moment it fell open. His chest was as white as Mellor's . . .

The white-chested Indian said weakly, " Give me your other hand," and, as Mellor bent down, he took it. He bunched his knees suddenly, jambing his feet in Mellor's stomach. Then he pulled as he straightened his legs. Mellor went over helplessly. It was a sacrifice throw but for a man already lying it was perfect.

Mellor, as he swung over, swore. He was certainly getting old to fall for that one. He remembered to tuck his head in but he landed very heavily. He was a man of middle age and he was shaken. He lay for a moment, collecting himself. The two West Indians had come out of the café and were watching him impassively, for this wasn't a part of London where you intruded on private fighting. Mellor picked himself up, recovering the pistol. He looked both ways but Starc had gone . . .

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Forty minutes later he was in his Superintendent's room. On the table was a clutter of photographs, maps, and a pistol. The Superintendent was recapitulating. "You're sure it was Starc?"

"I am. I couldn't swear it in court because I didn't spot him when he looked like an Indian. You know what a lawyer could make of that."

"I'm not a lawyer. And his speech?"

"Not an Indian's English. Nor an Englishman's either."

"And these other two men?"

"They were talking Polish. I picked up a little Polish in the war."

"But they changed to something else?"

"Positively not Polish."

The Superintendent nodded at the pistol. "That isn't Polish either." He thought for some time, then picked up a telephone. He spoke briefly but listened much. When he hung up again he reached for a map, putting a pin in the heart of N.4. "That's where it happened?"

"Yes."

The Superintendent looked at the scale of the map then, with a blunt blue pencil, drew a quarter-mile circle round the pin. "I want that beaten house to house. What we were looking for was a missing diplomat, now we're looking for a diplomat whom somebody's trying to kill. Take all the men you want. I've full authority to turn the heat on." The Superintendent looked at the map again and his mouth shut grimly. "Authority," he said, "and orders too." He pointed at the circle with the blunt blue pencil. "Comb it and comb it well. Find him—we've got to."

Alex Gorjan had been at Mellion Lee's cottage part of a day and one night; already he had settled to a routine which he had decided would amuse him. Nags Cottage was itself diverting, since it wasn't a cottage at all but a substantial house. There were six bedrooms and, incredibly, six bathrooms too. Gorjan knew this because he had slipped away to count them. He had heard that the airier sort of psychiatrist had elaborate explanations about the compulsion to over-cleanliness: Gorjan himself thought it wasteful—anti-social. He took a bath when he felt he needed one or when the relaxation of hot water tempted him. Six bathrooms were simply wicked.

But the so-called cottage was undeniably comfortable. There were an Italian cook and her cousin as housemaid, a jobbing gardener from the village nearby, and a handyman car-washer who lived in separate quarters. Since the house was called a cottage, his cottage was called a lodge. The food was good and the wine, if undistinguished, potable.

At dinner, which had been excellent, Mellion Lee had been the accomplished and worldly host. He had let Gorjan do the talking, sliding in an occasional question, extremely well informed, even, when they had skirted science, surprisingly well informed. And

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it hadn't been disappointing to discover that Lee and Margaret Palfrey shared a bedroom. Alexander Gorjan had shrugged. He'd been mewed up in hospital and she'd thrown herself at him. He could live without an encore and he settled to enjoy himself. This house was an absurdity, its capitalist roots a scandal. But a man could be content here.

Mellion Lee seemed happy too—Margaret Palfrey had noticed it. Observation was an essential of both her professions, and she wasn't insensitive to the moods of the men around her. There was something new with Mellion Lee, though she couldn't quite pin it.

She had heard that other voice again, the voice of a Mellion Lee she did not know, dropping assured crisp orders to the handyman. And Lee hadn't been taking sleeping pills. Last night he had woken, pulling her towards him, not thinking of his technique now, the books he considered bible, but taking her almost attritively. He'd enjoyed himself greatly and for the first time she'd enjoyed him.

And he'd surprised her more than physically. There had been sardonic comments about the diplomatic world which she would never have believed if she hadn't heard them, and his manner with Gorjan had astonished her. Though he mightn't know much science he had known very well how to talk to a scientist.

In the enormous bed next morning Margaret sighed. She was a woman still though there had been men who had rudely denied it, and Mellion Lee was beginning to interest her. The unexpectedness changed her sigh to a tiny gasp. Under the diplomat, the rich American, was something called Mellion Lee. A vigorous something and almost happy; and Margaret believed she knew the reason. The Mellion Lees weren't happy because the breaks came in: all their well-ordered lives the luck had run their way, or if it hadn't they could always go out and buy it. So this wouldn't be material, some sudden promotion or office coup. No. Mellion Lee had faced something. Mellion had decided. She didn't know what and she did not care.

She rolled from the bed and dressed, brushing her hair carefully. For a woman of forty—well, forty-one—she thought it was rather nice. She went downstairs to the dining-room. Lee had gone out with Gorjan, showing him the Bentley. There were coffee and milk on hotplates and a basket of rolls. She didn't eat breakfast and the Italian servants knew it. She rang the bell and, when the maid appeared, said firmly, " Eggs and bacon. Lots of it."

Russell and James Scobell were talking, this time in the solid but unpompous comfort of Russell's room at the Security Executive. Scobell was rubbing his carefully shaved jowl, saying a little doubtfully, " It's a much smaller party at Nags Cottage than I expected. Just Mellion Lee, that woman of his, and Alex Gorjan himself."

" From which you deduce? "

" I don't deduce. I simply point out that what we were both

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assuming was that Lee would try to *tempt* Gorjan. He'd boost the American way of life which all intelligent Europeans know perfectly well means the American standard of living. For that I should have expected more than one American. A principal, in fact, but chorus too."

"No doubt. But he might try something else, some variety of pressure, possibly blackmail. That would be amateur too, and that might fail disastrously. People like you and me would be left to sweep the bits up."

Russell poured sherry and Scobell drank half of his. Charles Russell suppressed a flinch but didn't comment. Across his own glass he said, "To sell the American way of life you'd use more than one American. But for any sort of skulduggery, even the most maladroit, the fewer in the ploy the better."

"I hadn't thought of that side." James Scobell was reflective.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it thinking—just a springboard for thought."

"But it does fit the facts, though I agree only negatively. The implication, if I may use the word, is that there won't be any sales talk. They'll go straight to the pressure. God knows what sort of it. That's where we're hamstrung. You think this Margaret Palfrey's in it too?"

"I simply don't know."

There was a silence while both men thought. They had exchanged their papers, the Security Executive's file on Margaret against James Scobell's on Lee. It had made Russell think—what he would have agreed was really thinking.

James Scobell broke the silence. "Then what do we do now?"

"I don't think there's much we can. For one thing we may be entirely wrong and for another we've got our hands tied."

"While a diplomat makes a mess of it? Till we have to go in with the brooms?"

"I'm afraid that's what we started from."

"You've told Copeman of this? You've warned him?"

"I wouldn't say warned him." Russell was dry but still urbane; he added meticulously, "Oliver Copeman has very precise instructions."

"Which cover some foolish action by an amateur like Lee?"

"No," Russell said, "I couldn't swear that . . ."

Oliver Copeman had indeed had very precise instructions, though they hadn't included breaking Mellion Lee's safe. By the standards of the Executive he wasn't an expert locksmith, but he was a man of varied competences and the safe at Nags Cottage had been an intolerable temptation. Nobody, he had decided, had the right to have an antiquated box of ancient steel with a lock like that—just a straightforward job in the small hours to relieve the monotony. For Oliver Copeman was bored.

Alexander Gorjan had arrived for tea on Thursday, whereafter nothing had happened whatever. On Friday morning Lee had taken him driving in the Bentley, then there had been lunch—an

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ample one, Copeman had gathered—and Gorjan had gone to bed to sleep it off. Afterwards dinner and a good deal of chatter later. Mrs. Palfrey had gone up early but the men had sat talking till well past midnight. It seemed about as innocent as anything could be, and it was Copeman's impression that he was wasting his time. It wasn't an occupation he was used to.

It was now three o'clock on the morning of Saturday and Copeman, with a small black bag, was in the room they called the library. He had made his reconnaissance the night before and he hadn't considered failure; he had given himself ten minutes and in practice he took nine. The door of the safe swung open.

Copeman examined the contents methodically. He hadn't let himself speculate on what he might find and in fact he found little. There was a pile of notes and he counted them quickly, flipping them through his lightly gloved fingers. Three thousand dollars—far too much to keep around even if the safe had been a good one. How the rich asked for it! And there was a single file of papers in an unmarked cover. Copeman put the money back, opening the file.

At once he was interested. There were perhaps sixty pages, divided into unequal parts by cardboard separators. The first section was diagrams, graphs, and what Copeman took to be the prints of complicated electrical circuits. All were clearly numbered. The second part meant nothing, twenty pages of algebraic symbols tantalisingly salted with an occasional calculation in straight arithmetic. Each group of symbols, each calculation, was again carefully numbered.

Copeman looked a second time. He wasn't a mathematician but he could recognise an equation.

He turned to the third part, his eyebrows rising. This was the largest section and it was words. It was laid out as *Question* and *Comment on Answer*. Copeman read Question 24 and shrugged. The question was framed to be answered yes or no but he didn't understand it. He went on to the Comment:

Comment on Answer

(*a*) If answer is positive, refer subject to Diagram 17. A squared area has been blocked in in blue pencil where the abscissa meets the ordinate. Ask whether the relationship remains purely linear.

(*b*) If answer is negative, refer subject back to Equation 36. In the light of the negative answer can it still be said that Theta remains a function . . .

Copeman pursed his lips in a silent whistle. He shut the safe but didn't lock it, the file still in his hand. Then he sat down to think. This must go to London, to the Photostat boys and fast. And it wouldn't be so easy.

It wouldn't be so easy because he'd have to take a car. Copeman looked at his watch. It was three twenty precisely and to London on empty roads perhaps forty minutes. Then it would be up to

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the Executive, but if they could work fast enough there was a reasonable chance that he could manage to put the file back before the maids woke at six. That was a working risk, but taking a car was a very poor bet indeed. The garages weren't by the lodge but built on to the house at right angles. Moreover the maids lived above them. Still, the drive sloped sharply downwards so he needn't start the engine and wake the women. He could coast away almost silently, but returning he'd be stuck.

Copeman decided coolly that the car didn't matter. Provided he put the papers back it wouldn't be important that a handyman was sacked. Colonel Russell would replace him. So he'd motor back from London but he'd leave the car down at the lodge. Then up to the house on foot, back to the vital safe. When the house woke they'd miss the car, and promptly they'd dismiss him. He might plead he'd a girl in London.

His excuse wouldn't matter once the file was safely back again. That file was as hot as hell.

Oliver Copeman went out to the garage silently. He had the key on a ring and he opened the sliding doors. It took him some time since he did it very carefully, then he stood for a moment thinking. There were the Bentley and an American convertible—a cow of a car, he thought her, for she rolled abominably. In traffic the Bentley could beat her, but in the middle of the night on empty roads she could show hairy heels to a middle-aged Bentley. Copeman edged her out cautiously, then, when the preposterous thing was rolling, opened the door. As she slid down the drive he checked the petrol. Yes . . .

Once past the lodge he started the engine. . . five litres, he guessed, and maybe more. He'd use every one of them . . .

Thirty-five minutes later he was at the Security Executive. He went straight to the Duty Officer, tossing the file on his desk.

"That's just about as hot as it can be."

The Duty Officer flicked the pages. "It does look pretty sinister. All that mathematics . . . Where did you steal it?"

"I didn't steal—I borrowed. That's the point. I've got to put it back before the house wakes . . . How long will it take to Photostat?"

"There's nobody in Photography in the middle of the night."

"I know a bit and there's a good machine. We'll have to try it ourselves."

When they had finished Copeman looked at his watch again. They had taken just over the hour. "I'll just about make it."

The Duty Officer nodded at the Photos. "And this lot?"

"They're to be in Colonel Russell's hands the minute he wakes. Serve them with his morning tea."

"On your orders but not otherwise. He hates working outside the office. If they're not really as hot as you think you're for it."

Copeman said dourly, "I'll take the risk . . ."

Colonel Russell was still in a dressing-gown as Lord Normer

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shut the file of Photostats. Normer asked reflectively, " Now where did you find this? "

" I'll tell you that later when you've told me what it is."

" It's a questionnaire, a brief. And it's a very good brief indeed."

" Could a diplomat have done it? "

" None that I've met or ever expect to."

" Then it was done *for* a diplomat. The original of that file was found in a safe belonging to an American, Mellion Lee. Who is Scientific Counsellor at the embassy. In whose house, at this moment, Alex Gorjan is staying."

Lord Normer said, " God in heaven."

" Yes . . . Now tell me about the questionnaire."

" It's been done by a first-class scientist but it's been done to be used by an intelligent layman. If the layman knows some mathematics so much the better. It puzzled me when I read it at first. These questions could only be answered by a second scientist, so why should the first take the trouble to reduce highly technical material to a more or less yes-no form to be administered by a non-scientist? Why not go straight to the other scientist who talks the same language you do? And of course get a better answer. As I told you, that puzzled me. Now I'm afraid it doesn't."

" You're beginning to frighten me." Russell rose unexpectedly, striding to the wall and back. Opposite Normer he smiled almost shyly. " There's something I'd like to ask you but the possible answer scares me."

" All right, let me help you."

Lord Normer lit a deliberate pipe and Russell sat down slowly. " I think you were going to ask me where those questions would lead if answered."

" I was trying to face that one—yes."

" I may assume that it was Alex Gorjan to whom they were going to be put? "

Charles Russell nodded.

" Then if they had been put to Gorjan by an intelligent man who had had the chance to discuss this questionnaire with the scientist who framed it, a great deal would have been learnt about Gorjan's work. I don't put it higher since I don't think I need. Not his secret—we agreed before that he didn't have one—but this brief was drawn up by a scientist who had been making much the same guesses I have about what Gorjan's close to." Lord Normer considered, then went on still more carefully. " Put it like this. If I had the answers to those questions I'd be right on Gorjan's tail. I might not reach what he would since I'm clever enough to know he's cleverer. But I'd be running down the same straight road. And so, I must tell you, would half a dozen others." Lord Normer tapped the Photostats. " Including the American I'm sure prepared this."

Russell murmured an apology, walking to the telephone. When he had his number he said briefly, " Mortimer? Get in touch with Copeman at Mellion Lee's house in Surrey. Copeman lives at the

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lodge and there isn't a separate telephone. Take your own car or mine. Don't be seen contacting him unless you have to, but get him to ring me back. If it seems really urgent *bring* him back. That would blow him of course, but it may be unavoidable. You've full discretion within the limits that I must speak to him by noon."

Russell put the receiver back, returning to Lord Normer. His housekeeper had brought coffee and Russell poured it. Lord Normer said, "There's one thing that still puzzles me."

"Just one?"

Normer ignored it. "We've been assuming that these questions would be put to Alex Gorjan?"

"We have."

"But why should he answer them?"

Charles Russell's face was suddenly a stone. "That," he said grimly, "I mean to find out."

Mellion Lee had never intended to sell the American way of life to Alex Gorjan, far less to persuade him to live in the United States. He remembered that a very important visitor to London, his father's friend and emissary, had spoken to him of persuasion, adding in a manner which he had imagined to be meaningful but which in fact had struck Lee as inanely cloak and dagger that there was more than one sort of persuasion. Mellion Lee smiled ironically. What had the fool been thinking of—granted, that is, that he had been capable of thinking?

Gorjan was a communist and proud of his race and nation. His tastes, though expensive, weren't tainted by ambition, and his country, the Confederate Republic, could meet them generously. The bland assumption that every man had his price was at least more realistic than an old man's hints at an unspecified skulduggery, but applied to Gorjan it wasn't less impractical. That approach would be unfruitful.

Mellion Lee had always had another. It appealed to him intellectually since he started with an advantage. He wasn't a physicist, he knew nothing of microwaves, but he knew that the great division wasn't between one sort of scientist and another but between men with a scientific discipline and those without it.

His own skills were somewhat rusty but his training, the way he thought, remained. He would have a language in common with Alex Gorjan, above all he could ask him questions which a scientist would understand. He certainly couldn't frame them and far less assess the answers, but he was confident he could handle it. Lee had never believed that Gorjan had a simple secret: to a man of his training the word itself was suspect. If Gorjan had possessed what was popularly called a secret he would never have been allowed to leave his country. But he did have a line and he was running it brilliantly. That was common knowledge. He had experience, maybe know-how.

Mellion Lee meant to get it.

There had been a series of enormously expensive telephone calls

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across the Atlantic and, as their result, a file had been flown over and delivered to Lee personally. He had studied it thoroughly, briefing himself carefully within what he realised were the limits of his competence. He had a great stake to play for and he could put his motive simply. The word wasn't one which you often heard in embassies, and in the circles which Lee patronised off duty it would raise an embarrassed snigger. The word was patriotism.

Mellion Lee was an American; he wished passionately to serve. Usefully, he thought, for once. The wasted years, the sterile talk and protocol . . . And his father was ashamed of him, a diplomat, suspect of futility and of English affectations, half a man. But this was opportunity and he a Lee. His father might be ashamed of him but he wasn't ashamed of his father: his good opinion mattered still. It mattered very much.

Lee had planned carefully to earn it, deciding he wouldn't rush things. He'd give Gorjan Thursday, all of Friday, to relax in; he'd build up the atmosphere, friendly and neutral; he'd lower the defences, particularly the unconscious ones. Then he'd start work on Saturday.

Mellion Lee had planned that too. He'd had a brief from America but he'd also had something more. It was a leather case, six inches by four and perhaps an inch deep. Mellion Lee had opened it, shutting it quickly, suppressing what had almost been a shiver. That part would be for Margaret. Margaret Palfrey had once been a doctor. That was why she was at Nags Cottage.

He woke at five on Saturday morning, conscious that he wouldn't sleep again. He looked at Margaret Palfrey but decided quite coolly against her. He was forty-five and he had work to do. Instead he slipped from the warm bed quietly, putting on a dressing-gown. He might as well use the extra hours, there was a point which still slightly worried him, and it was extraordinary how the disciplines of youth came back at you. He *must* get it right; he'd even telephone if necessary . . .

Mellion Lee went downstairs to the library. He switched on the light and walked to the safe; he put his hand on the handle and at once the door moved . . . So he'd been unpardonably careless, he must really watch the little things. He pulled the door open, frowning, and looked in. The file had gone.

The money was there still, so it couldn't have been a burglar. He sat down, shocked but calm, to think it out. Somebody had been watching him, somebody somehow knew. He'd lost before he started.

Mellion Lee looked at his watch. It was ten past five and faintly lightening. He couldn't go back to bed again and there was nothing he could do. He went upstairs, shaving and dressing quickly. He might as well go for a walk—a walk might steady him. As he unlatched the elaborate front door he saw that the garage was open.

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It was a moment before the penny dropped. The handyman had the second key and the handyman could drive. The convertible wasn't there.

Lee began to chew on it. Assume this odd-job man was some sort of agent. Then he wouldn't be quite a fool; he would realise that simply stealing a file wouldn't be very clever. For one thing there could easily be a duplicate, and for another Lee himself would be bound to miss it some time. Whereupon he could change his plan and the agent's employers would be groping in the dark again. But copy it, slip it back, interpret it at your leisure . . .

Mellion Lee let his breath out in a long soft sigh. That was the intention—he'd have done the same himself. So the handyman meant to come back. He'd plan to return the file and lock the safe.

Mellion Lee walked down to the lodge. It was empty, as he'd expected. The door was unlocked and he began to search perfunctorily. The handyman must return before the maids stirred so he hadn't much time for searching. Still, it was worth a confirmation if there was one. But Lee could find nothing—no weapon, no papers, not even *The Times* or *Telegraph* obliquely to hint that this servant wasn't quite what he said he was. Lee wasn't disappointed for he had found what he really wished to. It was a serviceable coil of clothesline and a short brass poker. He looked at his watch again. It was five forty-two and the maids woke at six.

. . . He's running it pretty fine.

Lee slipped behind the open door as a car stopped outside. He heard its door shut quietly. All the odds were that the handyman would go first to the house, but Lee braced himself instinctively. Nobody came near the lodge. He heard the faint shuffle of rubber-soled shoes, then silence as it died away.

It was five fifty-three when he heard it again. He had put down the rope but he still held the poker. It was a stout little poker and beautifully balanced. And that, Lee thought, was just as well. This wasn't his trade. He'd have just one chance and he couldn't afford to miss it.

A man came by him, hatless, and Lee struck. Oliver Copeman reeled, and for a second Lee felt sick. Then Copeman fell finally.

Mellion Lee put down the poker. Copeman was on his face. There was a considerable contusion, swelling as Lee looked at it, but no blood at all. He was grateful for that. He dragged Copeman to his bed and somehow got him on to it—legs first, then the rest of him. He seemed monstrously heavy. Mellion Lee collected the rope, tying Copeman to the bed and stepping back. It looked anything but a professional job but it should hold a stunned man for an hour. And that was all he wanted. An hour to get to London in the Bentley—himself, Gorjan, and Margaret.

He walked from the lodge, lighting a cigarette. It was the first since he had been there for he had noticed that the handyman didn't smoke. Mellion Lee began to smile. He had just stunned

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a servant and had bound him to his bed; he . . . a Counsellor of Embassy. Now his smile was a laugh, astonished but almost gay. He had forty-five years and he'd never been less aware of them. The cigarette tasted wonderful. He had forgotten his spectacles but he didn't seem to need them. So this was the world in this clear cool dawn. His senses were extraordinarily acute. From the house he heard the tinkle of an alarm clock. That would be the maids', of course. Six o'clock precisely.

He'd been a good one, that handyman . . .

Mellion Lee walked back to the house and straight into the bedroom. Margaret Palfrey was awake but she wasn't yet dressing. He said to her precisely, " Please get up quickly. We're going to London."

" What's happened? "

" I'll tell you that later."

She looked at him but didn't answer. There was an authority about him now, and even a certain ease: he'd moved further than decision. That had been taken and it had noticeably changed him. Now he had changed again. Mr. Mellion Lee was a Lee in action.

Margaret dressed and began to pack a bag.

" You won't have time for that."

" I—"

" Please come with me."

She followed him silently to Gorjan's room. Gorjan was

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sleeping and Mellion Lee woke him. He repeated the formula, the same tone of quiet authority.

"Please get up quickly. We're going back to London."

Gorjan sat up slowly and Margaret Palfrey watched him. His face was expressionless but it was clear he was thinking. He was surprised but he didn't seem frightened. He was reviewing the possibilities and it was evident he liked none of them. Presently he said sharply, "Why?"

"I'll explain in the car."

"I'd rather hear now."

"There isn't time."

There was ten seconds' silence as Gorjan thought again. He said at length mildly, "All right," swinging his legs from the bed. When he was standing he turned towards the wardrobe. He swung again suddenly, quick as a cat, rushing Mellion Lee in an animal's compact charge.

Thirty years earlier, in an expensive New England prep., Mellion Lee had taken boxing lessons. Now he reacted instinctively; he put up his right arm and poked out his left. It would have earned an approving murmur at the A.B.A. but it didn't stop Gorjan. He blinked as the gentlemanly left caught him somewhere below the eye but it didn't even slow him. He came in savagely, bent almost double now, hooking with both hands, wickedly low. He was a couple of inches higher than the target he'd been aiming for, but he hit Lee squarely and a foot below the belt. Mellion Lee folded and his head came down. Gorjan swung his knee up. He was a couple of inches out again but he pulped Lee's nose. Lee staggered back, falling across a chair.

He was up again astonishingly fast, his face a bloody mask. He was holding the chair and for a second Gorjan hesitated.

So did Margaret Palfrey. She had never seen men fighting in her life. Boxing was anathema, her friends disapproved of it, and free-style brawling wasn't something which often happened in the snootier literary journalism. What did a woman do?

She stood undecided. The second of suspense had gone. Gorjan was coming in again and Lee had the chair still. He raised it and swung, and Gorjan dived under it. The chair went across the bedroom, smashing the wardrobe's mirror. Both men went down.

Gorjan was on top and he was very much the stronger. He was strangling Lee efficiently, his thumbs on his throat, not pressing the windpipe directly but one on each side of it, inwards. Two terrified maids were standing in the doorway. Mellion Lee was weakening.

Suddenly it was over and it was Lee who was standing. He staggered and Margaret ran to him. He pushed her away, pointing at Alex Gorjan. He was lying on his back and he was motionless.

Lee said thickly through his bloody mask, "Look him over."

Margaret Palfrey knelt down. She felt Gorjan's pulse and she raised an eyelid. "He's unconscious," she said.

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"Hell, I can see it." Lee was choking still and furious.

"Did you manage to hit him?"

"Not where it would knock him out."

"Then I think he's had some sort of stroke. I'd better ring a doctor, I—"

"No." Mellion Lee had knelt down in turn, but facing away from Gorjan. Feeling behind him he worked the limp left arm across his shoulder, holding the hand with his own. His right arm groped for Gorjan's crotch, sliding at last between it. Lee lifted him in a clumsy fireman's carry. He staggered again and almost fell, but finally he steadied. "Got him," he said, and his voice was clearing. He pushed past the silent maids, down the stairs to the library. There he unlocked the safe and took a file out. He had one arm free to do it. Then, still carrying Gorjan, Lee went to the front door.

Margaret said feebly, "Where are we going?"

"London—I told you. Walk."

Somehow they made the garage and Lee opened the Bentley. Gasping, he got Gorjan in.

"You sit with him in the back."

"Mellion—"

"Get in. Don't talk."

They had gone perhaps a mile when Margaret spoke again. "Your nose," she said.

"We'll fix it later."

"I think it's been broken."

"I know it."

She was silent again as the miles slipped by. Gorjan, half lying, was breathing heavily. She felt his pulse again; she could feel it but only just. He was white as a detergent plug.

Margaret asked unhappily, "We're taking him back to the Hemmingway?"

Lee shook his head but he didn't turn it. "We're going direct to Gilston Road—to your flat."

"Why?"

"You'll soon find out."

Stevan Starc had slipped back to his West Indian railwayman knowing that he was in double trouble and that soon it might be triple.

Back in his little room he checked his position grimly. First his masters intended to eliminate him. The decision had taken four days but Starc hadn't been surprised at that. His masters were bureaucrats and he himself not wholly unimportant. His case would have gone to the top—to the capital, and at the top four days was quick. He hadn't been unimportant and he'd failed; worse, he might talk. So they'd decided to erase him. In a sense he was almost relieved, for his masters must have considered an alternative to the simple choice of pulling him out or killing him. For instance, they might have ordered him to confess . . . write

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to the police, make an affidavit perhaps, then walk into his embassy, demanding protection from Nikola Mitrovic, his ambassador. Starc almost smiled. Gorjan's safety was Mitrovic's special charge, so that would fix Mitrovic, dirty the diplomatic waters finally. An admission of planning murder, the First Secretary of the Confederate Republic, self-confessed agent of masters who wanted Gorjan dead . . . What a mess to exploit.

But that hadn't happened though it must have been weighed. Instead they were trying to get him. In the list of his difficulties that was easily first, but the second, if less dangerous, was ultimately as threatening. The English police were after him, and seriously too. That man from the café had said he was a policeman.

Starc hadn't expected that so soon. He had noticed that his own shirt was torn. Margaret Palfrey had stitched up pretty clumsily his face wound from Petar's knife—so he'd one scar the police wouldn't expect. He couldn't be quite certain that he'd been recognised. He decided that wasn't important. The essential was that there had been police in the café at all. If it wasn't a coincidence it meant that the police were uncomfortably close to him. If the Poles didn't get him the policemen would.

Or, he remembered, the Security Executive. That was third on his list of dangers but by no means the least. He had been taught to despise the English police—poor oafs, they were shamefully fettered—but his instructors had had much respect for a certain Colonel Russell. Who held the two men he had sent to the Hemmingway, who in time was bound to break them. Once his two men talked, once they positively connected Starc with the murder attempt on Gorjan, he'd be known as a dangerous agent of an unfriendly foreign Power. The Executive might leave it to the police at first, but if the police failed to find him they'd act themselves. And the Executive weren't policemen. That had been impressed on him.

Once those two men talked . . . For all he knew they'd talked by now. Stevan Starc swung his legs from the narrow bed. He began to clean his gun . . .

Detective Inspector Mellor, fettered oaf, carried no gun; he carried authority and a lifetime's experience. His Superintendent had drawn a quarter-inch circle on a map, telling him to beat it house by house. It could no doubt be done but it would take a regiment and, more important, it would take at least a month.

Detective Inspector Mellor didn't have a month but he still had his first idea. He'd decided to stick to it. Thieves—West Indian thieves especially. He was an experienced policeman and this wasn't his manor, but he had been shocked that in the quarter-inch circle there were a hundred and twenty-six known criminals and that ninety-three of these weren't in any sense natives of England. He had begun on the ninety-three. He could now call formally for the help of the Division in whose area he was operating and his own men had been reinforced. He had reduced his list to twenty

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and today was his birthday. It was a fine clear morning and he was allowing himself an unusual optimism. He was lucky on his birthdays.

But not in his problem, which geographically was difficult. In most of the area you could call at a house, and provided you watched the back of it there wasn't much chance that your man could get away. Starc's hideout was different. It was one in a row of what had once been artisans' cottages, now verging on slumdom though not yet officially. The row formed the west side of a quadrilateral of jumbled buildings, the south facing Fonthill Road. There wouldn't have been a problem if the houses had been back-to-backs, but in the centre of the untidy mass was a complex of little workshops. They were gear-cutting shops and chainmakers, the type of light industry attracting small notice but cosy profits, and they were tangled together in a lush promiscuity.

Mellor had made his recce, deciding at once that it would be impossible to picket them individually. Nor did he wish to. He saw his quarry as a rabbit in a cornfield. You put in a couple of reliable old dogs, and it was astonishing what they flushed for you.

So he wouldn't be over-subtle; he'd walk up to the house and ring the bell. Once in he'd look round and today was his birthday. If a policeman's gods remembered him he'd find a hastily vacated room. He wouldn't find Starc but that was all right; he'd find papers perhaps, or a bottle of stain, enough to reassure him. Starc would have slipped away, down one wall, over another, somewhere into the busy jungle which lay behind him. And that was all right too.

The quadrilateral was framed by four cleared streets, and at each corner Mellor had posted a police car. There were men in plain clothes patrolling between the cars. He'd beat out the workshops at leisure, for now he'd have plenty of time . . .

Mellor walked round the quadrilateral once again, checking his dispositions. Then he went to the cottage and rang the bell...

Stevan Starc had been expecting him. One of the advantages of his carefully chosen hideout was a skylight on to the long flat roof which joined the terraced cottages, and Starc had been keeping watch behind the surprisingly elegant parapet. He had worked out a brick and could watch without exposing himself. He had noticed that the street was unusually empty, then the police cars at its corners, finally the plainclothes dicks, absurdly self-consciously strolling. You could never mistake a plainclothes copper.

Stevan Starc snarled and waited. He, too, thought he'd plenty of time.

For his assessment hadn't been so different from Mellor's. Caught in this quadrilateral no man would break south, nor west against the men who hunted him. He'd go for the east. To the north the ground rose steeply in the embankment of a railway. At the bottom of the embankment was a stout wooden fence. It wasn't more than shoulder high, but at the top was barbed wire,

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four strands on wooden posts. Without time and wire-cutters the north would be impossible.

Except that it wasn't—Stevan Starc had seen to that. If he could get up that embankment he could lose a hundred policemen. For one thing they wouldn't be expecting it, and even if by some ill chance they had posted a man at the top Starc, if he had to, would shoot. Then over the bridge, across the tracks, and on to the first of a file of platforms. Down the steps to a tunnel and at once you were in a maze. There were a ticket collector and a barrier, but the barrier was vaultable, then a circular stair to the Northern line. It was the terminus here, the blind line down to Moorgate. Two platforms and in the rush hour trains from both. Or if you were unlucky here you weren't by a long chalk finished. Up another flight of stairs and to the subway. They'd have men at its mouth but you'd be fifty yards behind them. Turn right, twenty yards, then to the right again. More stairs and the main Northern now. Two tracks again and trains going both ways.

Stevan Starc knew for he had reconnoitred carefully. If he could reach the embankment . . . They wouldn't be expecting that, conceding him the initiative. They wouldn't be expecting it —the wire was impassable. Or had been until he'd fixed it.

He had slipped out in the small hours, severing it near the uprights, joining it loosely with ordinary wire. There hadn't been much tension and the job had been quite straightforward. It would have been difficult to spot the join even if it were known. So you took with you a good strong stick. You put the stick firmly against the strands; you pushed and you jumped. The paling alone was nothing.

Stevan Starc heard the bell ring and went down to his room. He had plenty of time, but it was a mistake to despise your enemies, or at least to despise excessively. He took his gun and he took his stick; he took gloves too, since there was no point in risking injury. Then he opened the window and dropped quietly to the ground . . . Between two crumbling outhouses and over a little wall. It was the passage behind the chainmaker's but the windows looked away from it.

He found a back door and tried it. Open. He stepped into a sudden noise and through it. One or two men looked up but didn't challenge him. They weren't being paid to challenge strangers. Across the yard and into the office. A girl was sitting typing and he waved at her. "I'm a new boy," he said. "We'll meet." His voice was steady but not his heart. Through the last of the doors, then the gate to the road.

Up the embankment. Out.

Stevan Starc stopped. There were police cars at every corner and in any other country they'd be armed. Machine pistols probably, for this was clearly a considerable operation. They'd have him in cross-fire, a murderous enfilade. Here all he had to watch for was an unarmed plainclothes dick. It had all been explained to him a dozen times. Nevertheless . . .

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He made himself open the gate.

At once a man jumped him, trying for the policeman's antiquated arm-lock. Starc countered smoothly, catching the man's right hand and bending it. He held the wrist in both his hands, then swung the whole arm in the wrestler's Irish whip. The man didn't go with it and Starc heard the arm crack. The policeman didn't utter; he stood dumbly, incredulous, his right arm hanging uselessly. They'd never taught him that one and he was thinking it was unfair.

Starc was across the road, instinctively bending double. From the police cars men were running but he had sixty yards on both of them. That was sixty yards in police boots—call it ten seconds. He was up on the paling, holding his stick in front of him. He threw himself forward and for an instant nothing happened. He'd rewired it too tight, he'd bungled . . .

Suddenly the four strands went. Starc jerked himself sideways away from them, falling in a clumsy heap. The pause had unbalanced him and he'd cut himself badly. But at once he was up again. He thrust through the alders, stumbling on a decade's débris. Behind him were futile police whistles but above was the siding. He reached it on all fours, straightening, tripping again on a hidden root, cracking his head cruelly on an untidy pile of coal. A railwayman stared and a man on a fish truck shouted. Starc ran across the bridge, ducking below the cast-iron sides. Even the English must shoot by now. But no shot came.

He reached the first platform, diving down the stairway. The tunnel now and almost home. On his left was the barrier. He jumped but he missed his vault. He fell again shatteringly but somehow got up. The elderly ticket inspector was trying to speak and failing. In forty years' service he'd never seen the like of it.

Starc stumbled down the spiral stair. He was dizzy with punishment and forced himself to slow. He couldn't afford another fall. If there wasn't a train he'd just about had it. Hell, he was going to faint. If there wasn't a train he'd never get farther. Not to the other line. There were two sets of stairs again, one up, one down . . .

The train was just leaving. The doors were shutting but with the last of his strength Starc reached them. He put out his foot and a guard swore. For a moment there was nothing, then a reluctant hiss of air. The doors opened slowly and Starc slipped inside.

For two stations he sat motionless, eyes shut. Then he lit a cigarette, inhaling hungrily. He got out at Old Street and thrust his fare at the ticket collector. A taxi was cruising. Stevan Starc gave the driver the address in Gilston Road.

There was one place he could go still and he'd kept the lady's key.

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★ ***The last part of The Antagonists by William Haggard appears in next month's Argosy on sale January 10***

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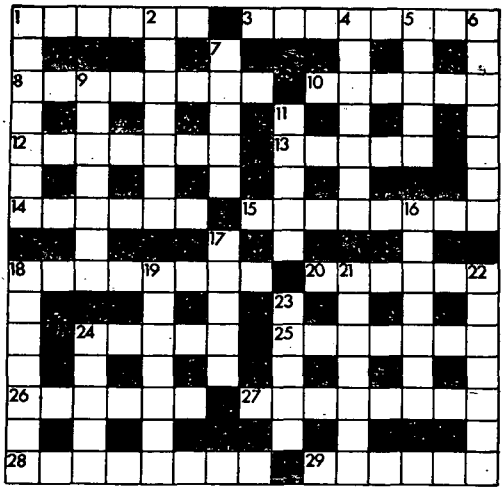
ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution on page 105



ACROSS

1 Waspish Scrooge (6).

3 Frost flower, perhaps (8).

8 Torn sock fell in a tangled mass (8).

10 Bargee makes party-dress fabric ? (6).

12 Seized—by French flu ? (7).

13 The task is muddled, but colourful (5).

14 Not the lowest type of carol-singers (6).

15 Where to put the pudding——but don't do it to it (8).

18 Last five make a Christmas merrymaking (8).

20 Turkey sometimes, bird never (6).

24 " Little bless'd with the soft phrase of——;" (*Othello*) (5).

25 His lordship ended on Twelfth Night (7).

26 Province of chilly weather ? (6).

27 A turn, and cruel princess comes to a full stop (8).

28 Each of us is the hero of this play (8).

29 Peppery reaction ? (6).

DOWN

1 Santa's transport almost deceives the eye (7).

2 This fish should be a willing party-goer (7).

4 Ride out the storm ! (7).

5 Thread rope through ring (5).

6 Gift that's always up to date (7).

7 Child slips into a steamer (5).

9 "Old —— and old wine are best" (7).

11 Loves to get the answer (5).

16 Out of money, so you explain (7).

17 Skip it, saucy one (5).

18 It's a frost, so to speak (7).

19 Statuary (7).

21 Sailor with a blemish will give up drink (7).

22 Pantomime might be there at Christmas (7).

23 Though short of glamour, it's love ! (5).

24 Sheriff's men aren't quite equal to a hot drink (5).

Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER, 1, and published on the tenth of each month by FLEETWAY PUBLICATIONS LTD., FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGDON STREET, LONDON, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, £1 19s. for 12 months, 19s. 6d. for 6 months. Overseas, £1 19s. for 12 months; 19s. 6d. for 6 months. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. GORDON & GOTCH LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. KINGSTONS LTD.
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